STREET AND SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY

10 CENTS

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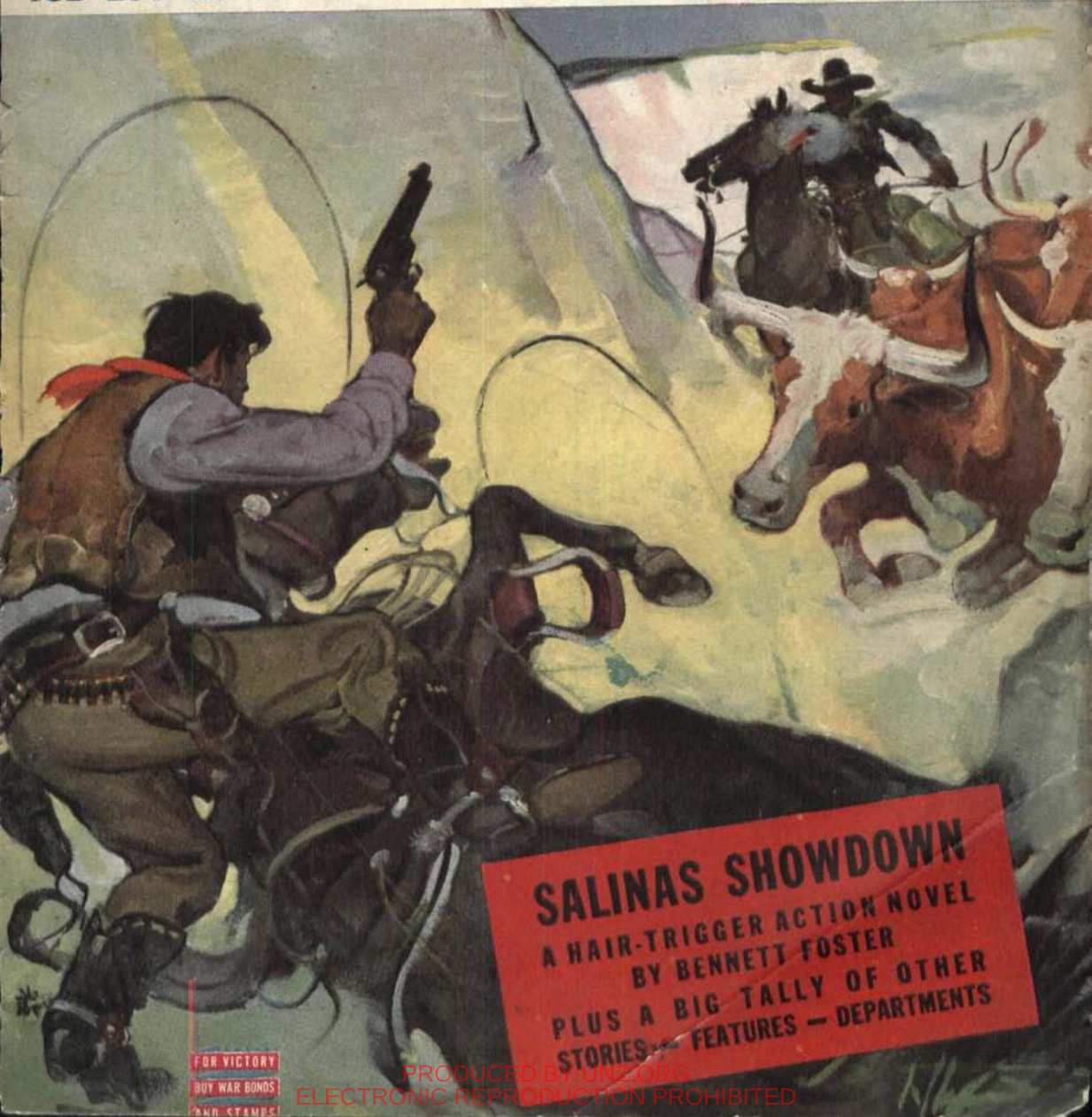
DECEMBER 5, 1942



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BY BENNETT FOSTER

PLUS A BIG TALLY OF OTHER STORIES — FEATURES — DEPARTMENTS

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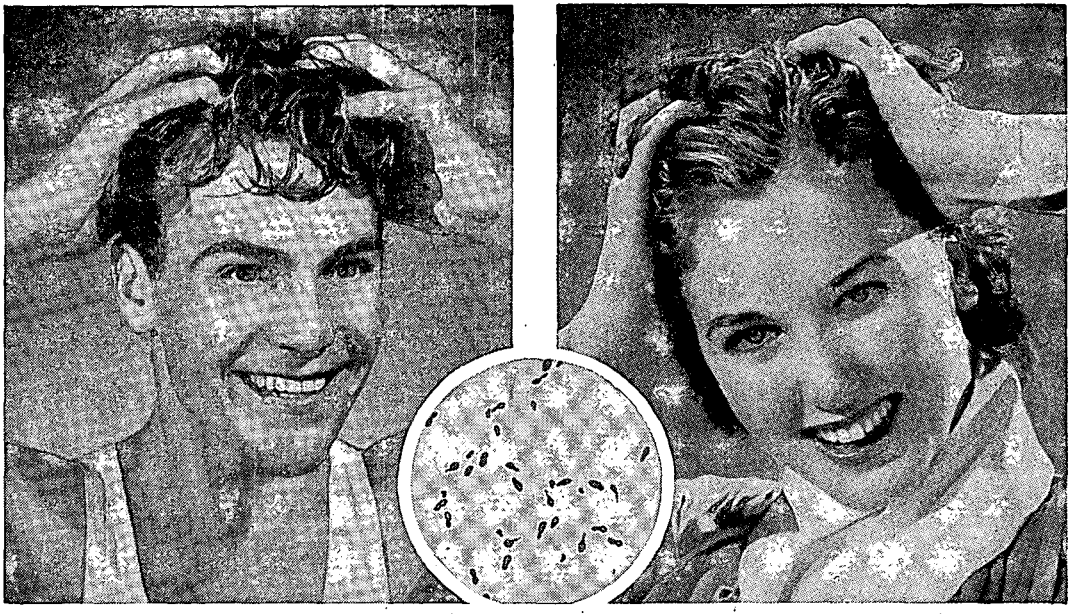

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WESTERN STORY

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CONTENTS FOR DECEMBER 5, 1942 . . . VOL. CCIV, No. 5

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BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL OF A TROUBLE-PRIMED COW TOWN

SALINAS SHOWDOWN . . . . . **Bennett Foster** 9
Salinas was a powder keg ready to blow up at the crack of a gun, and the only man Taffy Menifee could trust to side him was the horse thief he had back-tracked from Texas. . . .

A SERIAL

LORD OF THE TIMBER TRAILS . . . . . **Kenneth Gilbert** 98
Third of five parts
With murder on his trail and double-crossers on his crew, how can Steve Brandon ever hope to complete the job he has tackled?

SHORT STORIES

TRICKY TRIGGER . . . . . **Wayne D. Overholser** . . . 44
Bunchgrass Valley's schoolmaster was likely to draw his pay check in boothill, unless he could teach the Grinsteads a hot-lead lesson. . . .

SOURDOUGH SAVVY . . . . . **Paul Ellsworth Triem** 55
Dave Harnell would have to find a weapon more potent than a carbine or fall easy prey to the renegade whose life he saved!

CAYUSE COWMAN . . . . . **Hapsburg Liebe** 61
—that's what Tom Greer was. And he found out that it takes more than hoss sense to find stolen cattle. . . .

TINHORN TRAITOR . . . . . **Gunnison Steele** 65
Treacherous as Apache Drue and his gunnies were, Sheriff Tim Shane faced even greater danger—from the hombre who had once been his saddlemate!

GOLD BLINDED . . . . . **Cliff Walters** 75
"I'd like to buy into your claim," that sheeper said—never knowing that *oro* veins sometimes yield iron by the fistful. . . .

WESTERN STORY FEATURES

RANGE SAVVY . . . . . **Carl Raht** 66
Cattle country facts and legends.

THE QUARTER HORSE . . . . . **Jim West** 83
He has no equal for range work. . . .

COLD-TRACK DAN . . . . . **Harry R. Keller** 87
A poem of the range.

DEPARTMENTS

THE ROUNDUP . . . . . **The Editor** 6
MISSING 88
MINES AND MINING . . . . . **John A. Thompson** 89
WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE . **John North** 91
THE HOLLOW TREE . . . . . **Helen Rivers** 93
GUNS AND GUNNERS . . . . . **Phil Sharpe** 95

COVER BY H. W. SCOTT

All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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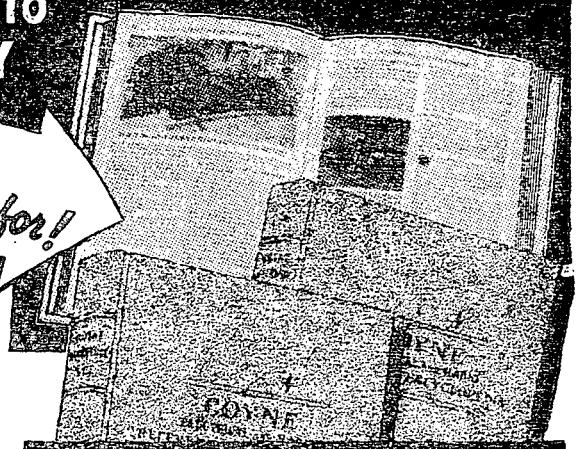

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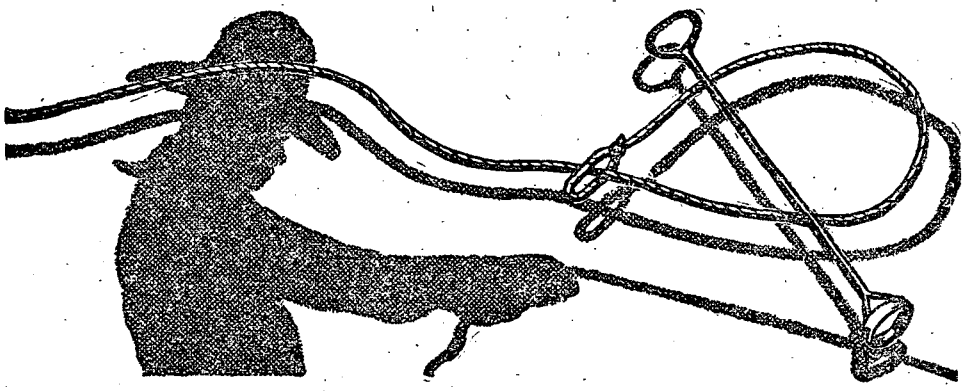

The Roundup

A SHORT while ago we asked whether any of you farmer members would like to get into the ruckus that is going on over the question of cultivating corn. If you'll remember, L. P. Holmes in his story, LEAD THROWERS' BOOMERANG (Western Story, July 4th), started it all when he said that field corn was cultivated. Mr. A. F. Sander of Stanton, Virginia, a farmer, disagreed with Mr. Holmes, stating that it couldn't be done. Then Author Holmes came back at Mr. Sander, saying flatly that field corn not only could be cultivated, but was cultivated, and suggested that Mr. Sander look at some of the ads in farming magazines to see for himself.

Well, that's when we threw up our hands and called for help. We thank Mr. Harold Morton of Headquarters, Idaho, for his prompt response. Says Farmer Morton:

Regarding the story by L. P. Holmes in which he mentions that you can cultivate corn after it has grown tall and developed ears, I disagree. You nor he nor anyone else can cultivate corn that tall. To begin with, a tractor cultivator would break it down, and if you used horses they would tear it down with their teeth as they were driven along. Corn grown that tall is six or seven feet high, and the cultivator is about three feet off the ground.

Tell Mr. Holmes to look into a mail-order catalogue himself and he will see what a cultivator really looks like, and then will know what little chance he would have using one on field corn.

Mr. Sander is absolutely right. As a farmer I agree with him, because I have raised corn myself—and plenty of it.

Phew! Mr. Morton sure sounds like he knows what he's talking about. But so did Author Holmes a few issues back. That's how it is when you don't know anything about the subject yourself—everybody sounds right. Anybody else like to pitch their two cents into the pot?

Coming next week—GUNSMOKE SERENADE, by Walt Coburn—a thrill-packed novel of a bounty-hunted cowpuncher and a battling sheepman who were the only hombres with the nerve to fight a power-glutted cattle clan. Many other top range stories, features and departments are also lined up for you, and, of course, there's a new installment of Kenneth Gilbert's LORD OF THE TIMBER TRAILS.

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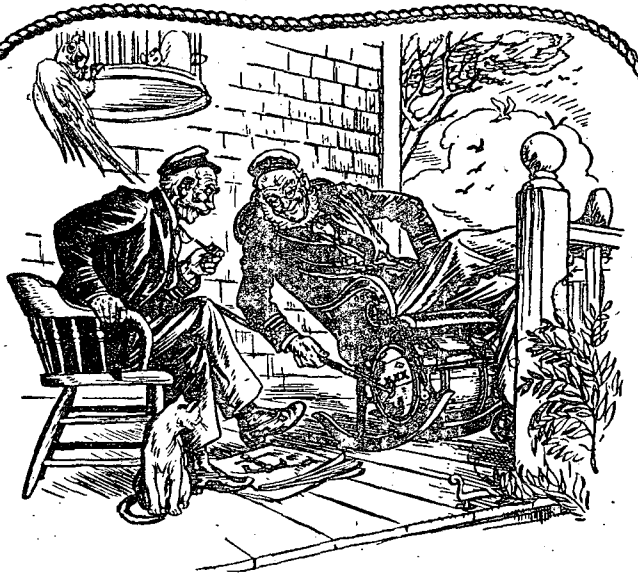

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by don herold

There are too many labels in the liquor world. I used to be baffled by all those bottles.

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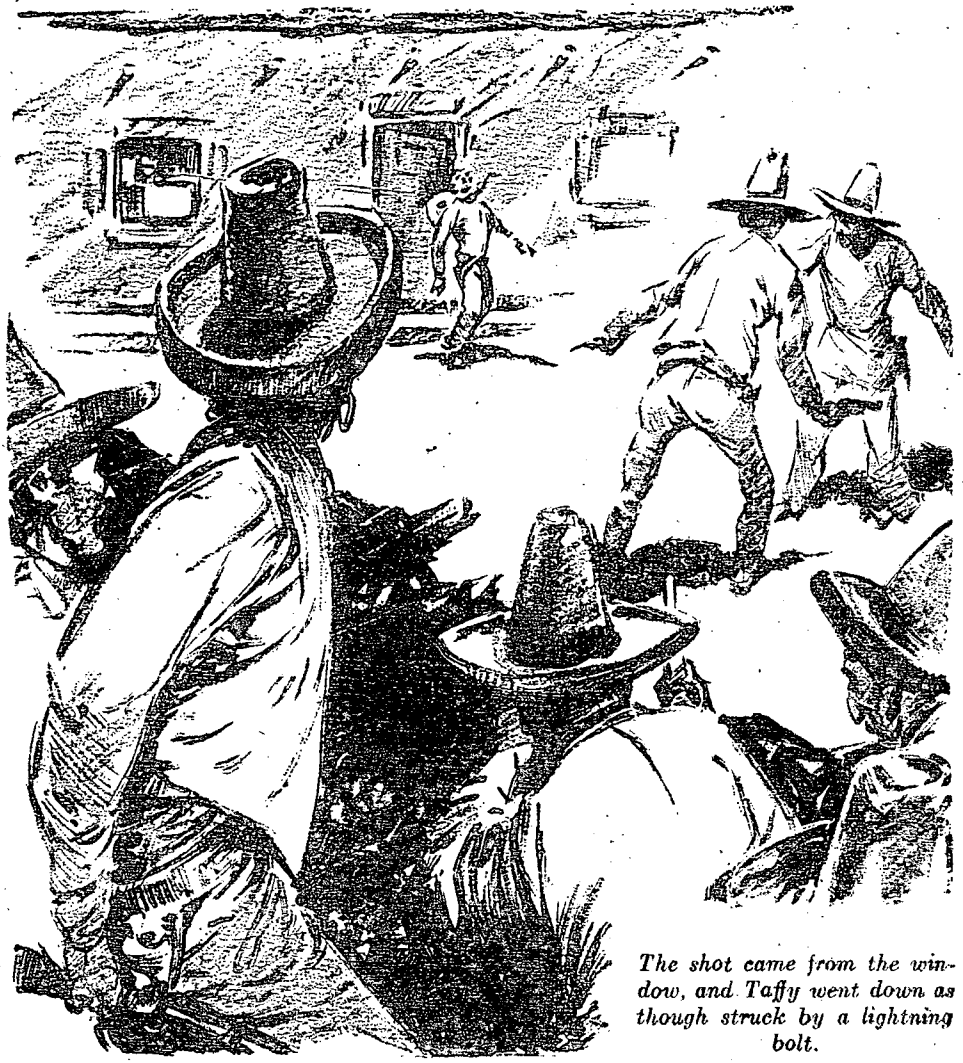

The shot came from the window, and Taffy went down as though struck by a lightning bolt.

SALINAS SHOWDOWN

by Bennett Foster

CHAPTER I

NO PLACE FOR A TEXAN

TAFFY MENIFEE admitted that it looked just plumb bad. Of the twenty-odd Mexicans, those that didn't have guns had shovels or picks or knives, and not one of them was peaceful. Taffy suffered no delusions about Mexicans as fighting men. They were good, particularly when they got up close with one of those curved, sharp affairs that they made out of an old file and that

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they so touchingly called *saca tripas*, "gets the guts." Taffy made no move toward the long Colt Frontier Model at his hip or the .38-55 riding in his saddle scabbard, and he kept his Buttons horse absolutely still as he grinned disarmingly and drawled: "Howdy."

There was a chattering of Spanish among the armed men. Taffy, to whom Spanish was a second tongue, heard a big, black-faced fellow snarl, "Let's kill the gringo!" and there were a couple of other comments even more bloodthirsty. Then from the group stepped one man, a youngster, smooth-checked, wide-chested, and with bright, alert eyes.

"W'at," the youth demanded, "you doing here, huh?"

"Me?" Taffy's eyebrows lifted. "I'm headed to Salinas and I stopped to watch you dig salt."

A little group—among them the dark-faced man who had declared for the gringo's blood—drew aside and there was much talk.

"W'at," Taffy's interrogator returned, "ees your name?"

"Taffy Menifee."

"Yo' are knowing Court Owen, *qué no?*"

Taffy shook the flaxen hair that gave him his name. "I don't know nobody by the name of Owen."

More consultation. "W'at you do een Salinas?"

"I'm lookin' for a horse." Taffy strongly wished that he could lapse into Spanish but thought better of the idea. If he talked Spanish these hard-faced gentry would become suspicious, knowing that he had heard their consultation. "A stallion. A red horse that stands about fifteen hands tall. He's got a star on his forehead an' he's branded a little 77 under his mane. You seen a horse like that?"

The smooth-faced youngster shook his head. "*No sabe*," he said. "I theenk eet more better you look for heem some place else. *Vamos!*"

IT was, Taffy thought, a little abrupt. He glanced at the smooth surface of the shallow lake and at the salt piles on the shore. There was a camp some two hundred yards distant and a few oxen grazed on the sparse grass. This, so knowledge told him, was Laguna Sal and the town of Salinas was quite a ways to go.

The big black-faced man, noting Taffy's glance, uttered swift objection in Spanish. "He is a spy. We cannot let him go. I say kill the gringo!" Taffy's eyes flashed to the speaker and the black-faced man continued: "He understands what I say!"

"You speak *español?*" the younger man demanded.

"Some," Taffy admitted. "If you haven't seen my horse, I'll just go along."

"Wait!" There was sternness in the command. Taffy waited, for eight guns, by actual count, were pointed at his brisket, and he knew that all eight couldn't miss. He wished that his curiosity had not gotten the better of him. He wished that he had not been so interested in seeing how these men took salt form the lake. He wished a lot of things, but mostly that he was out of there. The questioner, the dark-faced man and three others were discussing his case. Taffy gathered himself and gently rubbed Button's ribs with his spur. Buttons bunched his muscles.

"Get down!" the younger man commanded. "W'at your name, you say?"

"Taffy Menifee." Taffy straightened in his saddle, lifting himself. "Say— What's that a-comin'?"

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Heads turned in the direction indicated by his lifted arm. Taffy dropped back, thrusting his spurs home, and Buttons jumped his full length and lit running as a gun bellowed. Taffy ducked low in his saddle, getting right down to Buttons' neck. Buttons worked his legs like a jackrabbit covering country, and for the hundredth time Taffy was mighty glad that Buttons was a quarter horse. Carefully he turned his head and looked back. The group on the white salty shore of Laguna Sal, milled like a disturbed ant hill and diminished with the growing distance. There wasn't anything back there that could catch Buttons and there wasn't a gun that would be accurate at this range.

Taffy pulled the horse down from racing stride to gentler lope, and straightened in his saddle. This country out here, this little chunk of Texas separated from all the rest of the State by distance and a lot of brush, was not a friendly place, not a good place to be. Taffy wished, he surely wished, that the horse thief who had stolen Brian Boru had chosen some other spot to which to flee. Any place would have been better than this forsaken land along the river. Taffy pulled Buttons down to a trot.

AT sundown Taffy struck the sheep camp. As he approached, the herder scurried away, seeking safety in the brush, and a small, black-and-white dog attacked, threatening extermination with shrill and hysterical barging. Buttons, tired as he was, gathered himself to kick the dog into perdition, and Taffy lifted his voice to call reassurance. The herder stayed hidden, and Taffy, dismounting, attempted to make friends with the little dog. He had succeeded in some measure when the sheepherder returned, approaching warily.

"*Hola, amigo,*" Taffy greeted.

Assured that he was not to be killed, right then at least, the sheepherder came on. Taffy grinned the friendly, face-splitting grin that had taken him so far in many varied societies, and continued to talk indiscriminately to both the shepherd and the dog. Presently he got up and, when the sheepherder did not stampede, asked the way to water.

Taffy stayed with the sheepherder that night. There was mutton chili and good frijoles, and Taffy had tobacco. Over their cigarettes Taffy questioned his new-found friend. The shepherd—Donacio Sandoval was his name—had heard of a new stallion at Rancho de Santa Inez, but had no details. Taffy ventured another question. Why, he queried, were the men who gathered salt at Laguna Sal, so angry, and suspicious of strangers?

Donacio's flow of talk dried up like a well in a drought. He shrugged and calling his dog, went out to the sheep and did not return. Taffy, a little apprehensive, left the camp and betook himself to the brush. If Donacio didn't trust him, it was a dead sure thing that Taffy was not going to trust Donacio. This whole business was spooky, it was scary, and it was blamed interesting. Taffy's blue eyes were bright with curiosity. Why had the Mexicans been so hostile? And why had Donacio dried up when salt was mentioned? It was a puzzle.

In the morning, riding back to the waterhole, Taffy found the sheep camp gone. He drank and let Buttons water; then, mounting again, he rode on toward the west. He was glad as he rode that Donacio had

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not drawn into his shell before giving the location of the Santa Inez ranch.

Noon came. Taffy was forty miles from Laguna Sal, half as far from the waterhole, and a line of trees, dark against the barren hills, marked his destination. Here was the Rio Grande, and here, somewhere not too far ahead, was El Rancho de Santa Inez. Taffy topped one long rolling ridge and then another and a third. When he topped the fourth he had reached his destination. There in the valley that spread before him was a cluster of adobe buildings, corrals, barns, sheds and stacks. Cattle grazed in the valley and a horseman, riding easily along toward the house, looked up and saw Taffy silhouetted against the sky. The rider ceased his careless travel and, horse at a lope, went to the house.

More curious than ever, Taffy came on down the slope. Cottonwoods shaded the house and its long portal. Taffy dismounted and tied Buttons to a fence. Dogs barked at him and his spurs clinked as he strode along the hard-beaten path. At the porch he stopped. In the doorway was a girl, a yellow-haired girl with blue eyes and a firm chin and a flush of color on her cheeks. She was, Taffy decided, as pretty a girl as there was in the whole wide world or the State of Texas. He pulled off his battered, dust-covered hat and was instantly aware of his worn clothing, the sweat and dirt that covered him, and the fact that his boots were patched. In that confusion, and because the last language he had spoken was Spanish, he said: *"Buenos días, señorita. Yo—"*

The girl's eyes were hard and bright as diamonds, and her voice was as hard as her eyes. "Speak English to me, *Tejano!*" she said imperiously. "If you *can* speak English!"

CHAPTER II

CHANGED BRAND

TAFFY MENIFEE was stopped in his tracks. Surely this girl was an Anglo, and yet her voice carried the unmistakable accent of one more accustomed to Spanish than English, and the way she hurled the word *Tejano* at him, was an insult. Taffy was sunburned but the flood of angry color that came to his face, deepened the color. His eyes, as brilliantly blue as the girl's own, narrowed until they were thin slits and for an instant his face held that deep-carved, harsh expression with which a fighting man faces action. Then, dismarmingly, he grinned.

"Are you," he drawled, "real sure you'll understand me if I speak English? I talk it right good."

He could have slapped the girl and had no better result. She showed her reaction by flushing and her eyes glittered. "I'll have you thrown off the ranch!" she said angrily. "Get out. Go away from here! Get out."

"In time . . . in time. I'm lookin' for the boss. This is the Santa Inez, ain't it?"

"This is the Santa Inez and *I'm* the boss. You've no business here. Get out!"

Taffy's grin was more disarming and maddening than ever. "A little slip of a girl like you bossin' a big outfit?" he scoffed. "Look, lady, I'm just a green Texas boy, but if you expect me to believe you you're goin' to have to do better. A man named O'Hara runs the Santa Inez. I been told that."

"I am Gertrudis O'Hara and I own the Santa Inez." Five feet six inches of offended dignity confronted Taffy Menifee.

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"You give the orders?" Taffy shook his head. "I just cain't believe it."

"What do you want? Who are you and where did you come from?"

"Takin' yore questions up backward"—Taffy was elaborately polite—"an' not because I think yo're the boss, I'll tell you. I come from down San Angelo way an' my name's Taffy Menifee. I'm lookin' for a stud horse that was stole from our outfit. He's a big red with a star on his forehead an' he's branded a 77 on his neck. My old daddy sets a powerful store by him. Fact is, he told me not to come back unless I had Brian Boru. I'd sure hate to disappoint my daddy, an' I want to get home, so I'm lookin' at quite a lot of stud horses. I heard you had a new one."

TAFFY had watched narrowly as he spoke and had seen the girl flinch when he described Brian Boru. He thought that he was getting some place.

"I . . . we—" Gertrudis O'Hara was plainly flustered. "We did buy a new stud. But he's not your horse." The assurance came swiftly. "I know the man we bought him from and he's not a horse thief."

"No doubt," Taffy said politely. "Nobody's ever a horse thief till he's caught. If you don't mind, I'll hunt up yore foreman an' take a look at this stud. Just so as I can see what good studs there are in this country." He half turned.

"You can't see the horse. I told you to get out!"

"Afraid?" Taffy taunted. "Mebbe this fellow was a horse thief, after all."

Gertrudis O'Hara was young and she was angry, and she was absolutely sure of herself and of her position as mistress of the Santa Inez.

"I've changed my mind," she stated. "You can see the horse and I'll go with you to look at him. He's a red horse and he has a white star on his forehead, but he's not branded a 77. He's not your horse."

"No, ma'am. I'm right sure he ain't Brian Boru." Taffy's drawl was maddening. "Brian was a unchained devil. I don't reckon anybody around a woman-run outfit could handle him."

Gertrudis stepped forward from the door. "I can handle this horse," she flared. "I can handle any horse. The stud is in the barn. Come on!"

Grinning quietly, Taffy followed the irate mistress of the Santa Inez along the path.

The barn was big. Built of adobe, it towered two stories tall, and close to the entrance was a box stall. Gertrudis O'Hara paused by the stall, and Taffy, peering over her shoulder, saw a big red horse he could not fail to recognize. Here was Brian Boru and the end of his quest.

"A right pretty horse," he drawled. "Mind if I go in an' look at him?"

"He'll kill you if you go into that stall!" the girl warned.

"Who is this, Gertrudis?"

Taffy turned. A tall man, broad-shouldered as Taffy himself, with the narrow hips of a horseman, had come up silently behind him. The man was armed and he scowled belligerently at Taffy.

Elaborately polite, Gertrudis made introduction. "This is my foreman, Mr. Menifee. Bart, Mr. Menifee is looking for a stolen stallion. He seems to think we have his horse."

Bart beetled black eyebrows above his hawk's bill nose. "I bought this horse for the ranch," he snapped, "an' I know all about him, where he come from an' everythin'. He's not yore horse."

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"I haven't said he was . . . yet," Taffy drawled placidly. "My horse had a little brand under his mane. A 77. I'd sure admire to look at this horse's neck." He placed his hand on the stall gate and Brian Boru bared wicked yellow teeth and snorted dangerously.

Bart shrugged. "It's yore funeral," he commented. "The horse is bad."

Two natives had come into the barn and were standing wide-eyed behind the foreman. Taffy clicked up the stall's latch.

"No, señor!" One native took a hurried forward step. *"Es un caballo muy malo. Es—"*

"Brian, you idiot!" Taffy said to Brian Boru. "You fool with me an' I'll knock all them teeth down yore throat. Git over!" He slapped the vicious snaky head that swung toward him, and stepped into the stall.

Miraculously he was not destroyed. Brian Boru backed a step and Taffy, contemptuous of bared teeth and snorting threats, walked up to the stud. Reaching for an ear, he pulled Brian's head down. Deliberately he parted the mane and there on curved red neck was a brand, a small 99, the scabs on the loops of the nines scarcely healed. Taffy held the mane apart with spread fingers and glanced at Gertrudis O'Hara.

"Nice horse you've got," he said casually. "A right nice horse. You say you know the man you bought him from. I'd admire to meet the gentleman." He removed his hands and, turning broad shoulders to the vicious animal, walked out of the stall and closed the gate.

GERTRUDIS flushed a dull red. She had seen the crude alteration of the brand and impulsively she placed her hand on the stall door. Brian Boru charged across with snapping teeth, and the girl recoiled.

"Just like my horse," Taffy drawled. "He sure won't stand for nobody foolin' with him. Ma'am, I reckon you got a sheriff in this country? I'd like to talk to him a little." He started toward the barn door, but Bart, the black-haired foreman, barred the way.

"Look here, you," Bart growled, "maybe you can walk into that horse's stall an' handle him. That don't prove he's yore horse. An' I don't like yore talk about the sheriff. *I* bought that horse an' *I* say he ain't a stolen horse an' he ain't yores!"

It was evident that Bart thought himself the big man, the old he-coon of the country. Taffy's eyes were narrow as he looked at the foreman. Here was a boy that needed to be put back into his pants.

"I'm a right interestin' talker," Taffy drawled. "I expect me an' yore sheriff could have a nice enlightenin' conversation. Just who did you buy the horse from, mister?"

"It's none of yore business who I bought him from!" Bart blustered. "You east Texas cotton farmers think you can come over here an' do just what you like. You confounded two-buckle, one-gallused field hands need some showin'. Now you get off the ranch. Get gone!"

Bart made an error. Mistaking calm for mildness and placidness for fright, he dropped a big hand to the butt of his holstered gun, trying to run his bluff through. Taffy did not move, but his drawl became longer and his voice thinner, sure signs of danger. "Don't put yore hand on yore gun unless you mean to use it. An' don't call me a cotton farmer!"

"Get out," Bart rasped. "Get off the place, you cotton chopper!"

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He had gone too far. Taffy's gun slipped out of his holster almost without his knowing it, and Bart found himself looking at the hole in a seven-and-a-half-inch barrel.

"Ma'am," Taffy said flatly, "yore foreman needs a little talkin' to. This ain't no killin' matter or he'd be dead. You better go on to the house."

Gertrudis gasped. The two natives had followed along the barn alley and were standing, faces expressionless, eyes bright.

"Just take yore hand off that gun," Taffy directed Bart gently. "Unbuckle the belt an' let it drop."

"What are you going to do?" demanded Gertrudis.

"I'm goin' to learn yore foreman some politeness," Taffy answered grimly. "That's right. Let it drop easy. Now head outside."

Bart, divested of his gun belt, backed along the alleyway and through the door. Taffy followed, as did Gertrudis and the two natives.

"*Amigo, mio,*" Taffy said to the man who had warned him against the horse, "you do not like this *flaco*. You will hold my gun and see that it does not go off."

The Mexican's eyes glittered. "*Con mucho gusto,*" he agreed.

"You are a fine caballero," Taffy proclaimed. "I trust you with my life." He sheathed the long Colt, unlatched his gun belt and swung it out to a waiting brown-skinned hand. "Now come an' get yore lesson, mister."

BART did not await a second invitation, but came charging in, fists flying. He had been disarmed and shamed before Gertrudis and two of his men and he had to make good and avenge the insult. Bart Shue was foreman of the Santa Inez because men were afraid of him and in that tough border country fear was necessary to success. A gun was his weapon, a gun used behind a man or in front of one, and when he was deprived of his weapon he was deprived of authority. He hit Taffy four times, twice on face and shoulders, once on the chest and once on the steel-muscled belly. Then, at close quarters, he jerked up his knee in the foul blow that should have won the fight.

It did not. Unlike most gun toters, Taffy Menifee was not a slave to the weapon. On one occasion he had strayed to Galveston and there, broke, had taken sail on a sloop to New Orleans. He had spent a year along the water front and gained a liberal education. He knew as much about fists as he knew about knives, and as much about knives as he did about guns. He arched his body and Bart's knee grazed his belly. If that was the way this big black-haired bruiser wanted to fight, then Taffy Menifee was just the boy to agree with him. Anything was fair, and Taffy, working at a trade he knew and relished, set out to cripple, maim, or kill the man who had tried to foul him.

It was not a pretty fight; no affair of rules and blows struck above the belt and a rest between rounds. Taffy jerked his hard elbow into Bart's throat, clawed with extended fingers at the foreman's eyes, and as the man ducked, whipped his heavy fists into Bart's belly. Bart went down, and Taffy, pulled with him, used fists, feet, elbows and knees, and stiff, extended fingers. In less than two minutes on the ground he made a wreck of Bart Shue. Given another minute he would have killed the man, but he did not have the minute. A scream and hands that tore at him, brought a return to

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sanity. Staggering up, Taffy stood wide-legged, shaking his head as though to clear it, and on the ground Bart Shue lay bleeding, groaning, and a very sick man indeed.

Taffy became aware of the small hands that tore at him and shook them off. His head cleared and he stared at Gertrudis as though he had never seen her. Then, fully conscious of what he had done, of how he must appear to this white-faced girl, he wheeled from her and held out his hand toward the startled Mexican.

"Give me my belt," he ordered.

The weighted belt was thrust into his hand and Taffy donned it, still with his back to Gertrudis. "He ain't too bad hurt," he rasped, not daring to look at the girl. "I told you to go to the house. You should have gone. You shouldn't have stayed an' seen that."

Gertrudis' voice was almost hysterical. "I hate you! I hate you! You've killed him!"

"He ain't dead," Taffy refuted. "He'll be all right."

"Get away from here. Go! Go away!" Gertrudis' voice rose a tone.

Taffy bent and picked up his hat, settling it in place. "I kind of lost my head," he muttered. "I— Hang it all! I'll go!" Still without a glance at the girl, he strode away toward the house and the waiting Buttons.

CHAPTER III

NIGHT ATTACKER

SALINAS was not a town, properly speaking. The adobe houses were strung out along the river with a clump of them clustered about the twin-spired church, and across the river Colonial Torres flanked the Mexico shore.

Taffy, arriving with the dusk, let Buttons pick his weary way along the street. As he rode he eyed the buildings on either side. One, larger than the rest, showed lights, and dismounting, Taffy walked stiffly to the open door. He saw a long plank bar, a few tables and several men. Reassured, he went in. A stocky, swarthy man behind the bar, greeted him.

"Howdy, stranger.

"Howdy," returned Taffy. "I need a drink, a place to put my horse, somewhere to sleep an' somethin' to eat."

"We got all them things right here." The man behind the bar set out a bottle and a glass. "This is Renaud's place an' I'm Renaud. Two bits for the drink, four bits for the horse, a dollar for the grub an' the bed. Suit you?"

"It suits me." Taffy poured whiskey into the glass. As he drank he was aware of the curious eyes that examined him. Half the men in this room, Taffy would have bet, were on the dodge. And those that weren't on the dodge were just as curious as those that were.

"I'll show you where to put yore horse," Renaud offered when Taffy lowered his glass. "Supper's over, but I'll stir you up somethin' in the kitchen. Come along. Look after the bar, José."

A native slouched forward and Taffy followed Renaud.

Buttons went into a shed and was fed a little corn after he had been watered. In the kitchen Renaud squatted before a fireplace and blew life into the few feeble coals, while Taffy rested on a bench and watched proceedings. When the fire started the swarthy man sliced sowbelly and opened a Dutch oven to see if there was bread.

"Come far?" he asked.

"Quite a chunk." Taffy knew

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that he must answer a few questions and partially satisfy this man's curiosity or else be constantly under suspicion. He made a story in his mind. "I'm from San Angelo. Name's Menifee."

Renaud nodded and put the coffeepot on to boil.

"Just kind of moseyin' through," Taffy continued vaguely. "Seemed like San Angelo didn't suit my health too good." So might an outlaw have identified himself. Renaud's eyes were quick and bright as he nodded again.

"I thought I might catch on in this country," Taffy explained. "Know of a job?"

Renaud shook his head. "Nothin' around here. There ain't any ranches except the Santa Inez. That is, there ain't nothin' except Mexican outfits that won't hire a white man."

"So?" Taffy drawled. "What about that one you spoke of? That Santa Inez?"

Renaud laughed. "They won't hire a Texan out there," he said. "I reckon you can't get rid of the brand, so there ain't no chance for you."

"Ain't this Texas?" Taffy demanded.

"It's Texas, but you'd never know it," Renaud replied. "We're a long ways from Austin out here. This is kind of no man's land."

"What I meant was, why won't the Santa Inez hire a Texan?"

Renaud turned sizzling salt pork, and grinned. "On account of Gertrudis O'Hara," he answered. "The Santa Inez is an old land grant an' last year, after her daddy died, the State took part of the land away from the O'Haras. It made Gertrudis sore."

"Gertrudis. That sounds like a girl's name."

"It is. Gertrudis O'Hara!" Renaud almost smacked his lips. "She's as good-lookin' a girl as you'll find, even if her folks do come from Mexico."

"O'Hara ain't a Mexican name," Taffy demurred.

RENAUD lifted the frying pan. "Here, hold yore plate," he commanded. "Of course, O'Hara ain't a Mexican name. It's Irish. Away back yonder a long time ago some Irishman named O'Hara done somethin' for one of them Spanish kings. The king give O'Hara the Santa Inez grant. That's how come the name O'Hara."

"Oh." Taffy accepted the explanation.

"Gertrudis' daddy," Renaud continued, pouring coffee into a cup and placing the cup on the table, "married a woman in the States. Gertrudis went to school in a convent in St. Louis."

"You say her daddy's dead?" Taffy fell to work on the food Renaud had set before him.

"Last year."

"An' the State took some of the grant land? I though they couldn't do that. I thought all those old Spanish grants were left alone."

"That's what a lot of folks around here thought," Renaud answered. "The State claimed that the grant boundaries was out of line. They taken all the country north, up around Laguna Sal, an' throwed it open to claim. Go ahead with yore meal, Menifee. I've got to go out in front."

Renaud left, and Taffy, munching on salt pork and biscuits, considered the information he had received. It was all interesting, but it didn't lead him any nearer to his horse thief. He had, he thought, overplayed his hand. He shouldn't

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have lost his temper. What he should have done back at the Santa Inez, was to talk soft and ask questions instead of blowing up and wrecking Gertrudis O'Hara's foreman. Now he had a problem, for Brian Boru was at the Santa Inez and Taffy had to prove his claim to the horse and get him.

Mopping the last of the gravy from his plate, Taffy wolfed it down and finished the coffee. He was going to have to do some studying about this. That girl out on the Santa Inez was blue-eyed and quick-tempered, but—Taffy would have bet his bottom dollar on the fact—she was a square-shooter. If Taffy Menifee could prove that Brian Boru had been stolen, she would hand Brian right over to him. And the easiest way to prove that was to find the thief and knock a confession out of him. He wished—Taffy arose and settled his belt in place—that he'd found out who had sold Bart Shue the horse. Maybe when things cooled down he could go back to the Santa Inez and ask that question. But he wouldn't ask Shue. Taffy grinned as he left the kitchen. No, he surely wasn't going to ask Bart Shue.

FOUR men were playing poker in the barroom and Taffy drifted over to a bench and watched the game. He learned the names of the men from their conversation and something about their characters from the game.

Owen, big, heavy, triple-chinned, was a bluffer; several times he was run out on a limb by the other players. Dewey Pasters, the lathy sheriff, had no nerve. He would quit a good hand that a little show of force might have made a winner. Gerber bald and phlegmatic, played a coutious hand; and Castro, of the thin, black, well-waxed mustache, was sly.

The men talked little as they played, most of the conversation coming between the hands while the cards were shuffled.

"I'm goin' to collect," Owen stated, apparently resuming some old argument. "When them wagons get here I'm goin' to collect for my salt."

"You'll have trouble," the sheriff predicted. "I've told you, Owen, these folks have mined salt out of Laguna Sal for years. They think that the lake belongs to 'em. The O'Haras always let 'em take what salt they needed."

"The O'Haras don't own Laguna Sal now," Owen returned heavily. "I own it."

"Are we playin' poker or havin' an argument?" demanded Gerber. "I'll open for a dollar."

"I'll stay," Castro said. "The sheriff's right, Owen. Yo're goin' to have trouble."

"I like trouble," growled Owen. "I'll raise a dollar. Might as well go the whole hog as none." He shoved two of his few remaining pieces of silver into the pot.

Pasters dropped out. Gerber and Castro stayed, and cards were drawn. The betting went around again and then again. Owen had all his money on the table. "I'll call for what's in," he grated, and the hands were shown. Castro, grinning under his thin mustache, won the pot and Owen got up. "That's enough for tonight," he growled. "I'm leavin'. I don't have any luck with the cards."

"'Lucky at cards, unlucky at love,'" Castro drawled.

Owen's eyes were sharp as he glanced at the man, and he seemed about to speak; then apparently thinking better of the idea, he stalked to the door. Pasters got up

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and came over to sit by Taffy, and Gerber and Castro went to the bar.

"Stranger here, ain't you?" the sheriff asked.

"Is there any law about it?" countered Taffy.

Pasters shook his head. "Lots of strangers drift into Salinas," he drawled. "Mostly they go through. You ain't stayin' long?"

"Not long."

"It's a good healthy climate." The sheriff's eyes were quick as they scanned Taffy's length. "Nothin' that would prevent yore stayin' that I know of."

It was an openeing and Taffy took it. "There ain't much here except the climate," he suggested.

"I don't know about that." Pasters grinned. "Some of the boys do right well. Hello, Giles."

Another man had come into Renaud's cantina, a squat, broad-shouldered fellow.

Excuse me a minute," Pasters drawled. "That's Giles Woodward an' he wants to see me. If you think you'd like to stay an' start a business in Salinas, look me up. I do pretty well by them that stay with me."

Pasters joined Woodward by the door. They talked and, occasionally, one or the other glanced at Taffy. Castro and Gerber had gone out. Rising, Taffy went to the bar.

"How about that place to sleep?" he asked Renaud.

The place to sleep was a *jacal* that joined the cantina. Taffy put his saddle down at the head of the pallet that Renaud showed him, and stood his .38-55 Winchester against the wall. "I've had worse beds," he commented as he seated himself on the thin pad. "Better ones, too."

"It's all the bed *I've* got," retorted Renaud. "I don't sleep no better.

"I'm not complainin'," Taffy said placidly, tugging at a boot. "Good night."

Renaud said "Good night" and departed. Taffy got both boots off and had stretched out and composed himself for slumber when, at the front of the cantina he heard a voice bellowing curses.

"Where is he?" the bellowing voice demanded. "I seen him come down here. Where is he?"

Renaud's voice, recognizable only by the tone, answered, and the bellow resumed, not a whit pacified by Renaud's soothing.

"I'll show that blasted Castro. I'll beat the daylights out of him. He'd better stay away from Rosa or I'll kill the skunk!"

TAFFY grinned and released the butt of the Colt he had grasped. Evidently Owen and Castro liked the same girl, for it was Owen's irate voice he had heard. But it was no business of his own, Taffy thought as he lay down again. Girls always caused trouble, all girls, everywhere. Take that blue-eyed, yellow-haired Gertrudis O'Hara; she was making Taffy some trouble. If a man owned the Santa Inez rancho it would be an easy matter for Taffy to retrieve Brian Boru; but Gertrudis . . . well, just how could he handle her?

Thinking about Gertrudis, Taffy forgot about Brian Boru. Gertrudis! The name had a musical lilt and was almost as pretty as the girl that owned it, not quite so pretty, but almost. There wasn't anything that Taffy had ever seen as pretty as those blue eyes and that yellow hair and all the things that went with them. And what good did it do for him to lie awake mooning about Gertrudis O'Hara? He had lost his head out at the Santa Inez and beat up the foreman. He had sure enough torn his

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pants out there, and now he'd better go to sleep.

Suddenly Taffy came awake all over. There was no sleepy rousing, no yawns and stretching of sleep-cramped muscles. In one instant Taffy slept soundlessly and in the next he was awake. The *jacal* was dark. Starlight made the opened door a shade lighter than the stick and mud walls and Taffy, breathing evenly, stole his hand up to the Colt beside his head. The smooth walnut stocks of the gun butt were reassuring under his hand. Something moved across the lighter door and there was the faintest whisper of sound as Taffy's thumb found the sharp checkering of the hammer. Something moved within the *jacal*, too, silent as the night, deadly as a rattlesnake. Taffy's thumb contracted and the hammer came back, and even as he cocked the Colt he cursed himself. He had neglected to hold back the trigger and the clicks of the cocking hammer sounded as loud as shots in his intent ears.

Something swished by Taffy's head as he flung himself aside. There was a dull thud and dirt rattled down in a small, whispering stream. The doorway darkened suddenly and then was light again. The thunder of the Colt shook the *jacal's* walls and its flame lighted the little room, momentarily blinding Taffy. He heard a man squeal with fright and then there was the pound of running feet and, coming up, Taffy jumped to the door. He could see nothing except the night. Frightened voices yelled shrilly, and Taffy, having peered out into the night, went back to his bed and began to pull on his boots.

He had both boots on when Renaud, dressed in nightshirt and pants, appeared at the door, carrying a candle lantern. The cantina owner's face was frightened and his eyes big with alarm.

"What was it?" Renaud demanded. "What happened?"

"Somebody thought I had somethin' they wanted," Taffy answered grimly. "I woke up an' kind of spoiled the play. Bring that light here."

Renaud brought the light. Above Taffy's bed was a gash in the mud wall and on the bed itself lay a knife. Taffy picked it up gingerly.

"Made from a file," he commented. "Sharp, too. Well . . . I been wantin' a knife."

"You want to sleep in the cantina?" asked Renaud. "There's a door to it. Mebbe you'd—"

"No," Taffy drawled. "I can make it here all right. I don't know why I put on my boots. Now I got to take 'em off again. You could leave the lantern if you don't need it."

"I don't know who it was," Renaud said. "I think I'd better get Fasters. He ought to be on the job. I'll go an' get him."

"Just leave the light an' go to bed," Taffy ordered, tugging at a boot once more. "We can tell the sheriff tomorrow. He couldn't do nothin' tonight."

Renaud seemed to be uncertain. "If you—" he began.

"Just leave the light." Taffy, his boots off, stretched back on the pallet. "Good night some more."

Renaud wanted to argue. He held the lantern high and his face twisted as he talked. Deliberately Taffy turned his back on the man.

"Well, sleep here, confound it!" Renaud lost his temper with his placid guest. "I ain't responsible."

"You ain't responsible," Taffy agreed.

Reuaud put down the candle lan-

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tern and padded off. Taffy, after a moment, sat up and looked at the knife again. Then, with a grunt, he put it down beside the bed and blew out the candle.

CHAPTER IV

TROUBLE IN THE CANTINA

CHURCH bells wakened Taffy Menifee. He dressed by pulling on his boots and hat. That portion of his toiled made, he sat on the pallet, thinking, and then, with a grin, picked up the knife that had been thrown at him. Carefully slitting the top of his boot between lining and the calfskin leg, Taffy slid the knife into an improvised scabbard. He didn't hold with a knife but sometimes one came in handy; in any case, that hidden knife might be an ace in the hole.

When he entered the cantina, Taffy realized that Sunday was no different from any other day in Salinas. The place was occupied and, except that Castro showed marks

Lead reached out for Taffy as he rammed home the spurs and sent Buttons into a ground-covering run.

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of violence on his face, the men were just the same. Renaud's breakfast menu was a dreary repetition of supper, and after the meal Dewey Pasters approached Taffy.

"Heard that you got jumped last night," the sheriff said.

Taffy nodded.

"Some *pelado*, likely," Pasters ventured. "Ain't much use of lookin' for him. All these Mexicans will steal anythin' that ain't nailed down."

"That's what I thought," agreed Taffy. "I took a shot after he run an' I expect he's runnin' yet. Say, what happened to Castro's face?"

"Him an' Owen got into an argument," Pasters answered dryly.

After his talk with the sheriff, Taffy cleaned up. In his saddlebags were a fresh shirt and a razor. Using one and putting on the other, he made a better appearance and, with time on his hands, he strolled about the little town, arriving at a spot opposite the church just as the congregaion came out. He saw Gertrudis O'Hara enter a carriage and he lifted his hat gravely when the girl glanced at him. Gertrudis turned hastily away and for an instant Taffy was tempted to cross and speak to her, but discarded the idea. The carriage rolled away and Taffy continued his stroll.

In the afternoon, with time still heavy on his hands, he saddled Buttons intending to ride out toward the Santa Inez. As Buttons followed the meandering street, Taffy saw Gerber and Owen in front of Gerber's store. Both men saluted him but Taffy did not pause.

"Do you think he's headed for the Santa Inez?" Gerber asked when Taffy was past.

Owen scowled. "I don't know and I don't care," he rasped. "I'm talkin' to you about Castro. I beat the daylights out of him last night an' I want him to keep away from Rosa. If he don't, I'll kill him!"

"You can't do that," Gerber said quickly. "We need Castro." He was still following Taffy with his eyes and, having delivered his dictum, spoke again. "I wonder if that hombre's a Ranger. They're always turnin' up where they ain't wanted."

I don't care if he's a Ranger or not!" Owen snapped. "An' I don't think we need Castro. You said that he could handle the Mexicans. It don't look to me like he could. He didn't stop Vallejo an' Biscante from goin' up to the lake, an' Vallejo swears that he won't pay for any salt."

"He'll pay for it," Gerber assured him. "Castro will talk him into payin' for it an' if Miguel an' Blas Biscante pay us you can bet the rest of the Mexicans will."

Owen grunted scornfully. "If I'd had my way, Pasters would have arrested them two before they ever pulled out of town," he said angrily. "That's the way to handle Mexicans. Beat 'em to the punch. I don't think Castro's such a hot shot. An', after all, I had that law passed by the legislature an' I'm the man that owns the lakes."

"An' I'm the man that furnished the idea an' got Bart Shue to steal the old Santa Inez maps," Gerber reminded quietly. "I've got those maps, Owen, an' if you ever get the idea of double-crossin' me, I'll turn 'em in where they can be used, an' you'll go to Huntsville. Don't forget that. You get along with Castro an' quit foolin' with his girl. An' don't get drunk an' try to run a blazer on Vallejo an' Biscante. You can't fool with them two. I'm goin' to hunt up Castro now an' see if

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I can't smooth things out for what you done last night."

TAFFY, when he had passed Gerber and Owen, looked back and saw the storekeeper watching him. That pleased Taffy. He had everybody in town worried about who he was and what he was doing.

Beyond the church stood the rectory, screened by salt cedars. As Buttons approached, a small man in clerical garb appeared and lifted his hand in greeting. Taffy grinned and stopped his horse. "*Buenos dias, padre.*"

"*Buenos dias,*" the priest answered, and then lapsing into English: "I have not seen you before. You are a stranger."

"Just got to Salinas."

Each man eyed the other and the priest spoke again. "I am Father Peña."

"I'm Taffy Menifee."

"Are you"—the priest's eyes were steady and direct—"a Ranger?"

Taffy shook his head cheerfully. "Nope. Why?"

The priest shrugged. "No one but outlaws or officers come here," he returned. "I hoped you were a Ranger."

"An' if I ain't a Ranger, I'm an outlaw, eh?" Taffy drawled. "I ain't neither one, padre. I'm just a man lookin' for a stolen horse."

Again the two men stared steadily at each other and then the priest smiled. "No," he said, "I don't think you are an outlaw. Come to visit me, my son."

"*Seguro, padre.*" Taffy grinned. "I'll come around. So long." He let Buttons travel on along the street.

Late in the afternoon Taffy strolled into Renaud's. Pasters and Woodward were together and as he approached, Woodward scowled and walked away. Taffy joined the sheriff, stared after Woodward, and then turned to the officer.

"About that business you said I could get into," he began abruptly. "I been lookin' around. It seems to me that I might do pretty well in the horse business."

"There's no market for horses or cattle either," Pasters answered. "I dunno, Menifee. I been thinkin' it over. Yo're still in Texas. You might do better farther west."

"I might," agreed Taffy. "But yesterday—"

"That was yesterday." Paster's eyes were hard. "Today's different. I'm the law around here, Menifee, an' I think you'd do better in Arizona."

"I'll think it over," Taffy drawled. "I'd like to talk to yore friend, Woodward, before I decide. He looks like a businessman to me."

"Woodward's my deputy," Pasters rapped. "He'll tell you the same as I have."

Taffy grinned derisively. "I'd buy a drink, sheriff," he said, "if it wasn't Sunday. So long."

Taffy's sleep was undisturbed that night, for after Salinas settled down to rest he left the *jacal* and took to the brush. The sand was no harder than Renaud's pallet and Taffy slept untroubled. Next morning he was up betimes, bright-eyed and cheerful.

He strolled down to the bridge and talked to Jack Constable, the customs inspector. Constable was young and pleasant and he showed Taffy a tintype of his wife and their little girl.

"Should think you'd miss 'em," Taffy said, returning the picture to its proud owner. "Why don't you keep 'em with you?"

"Out here?" Constable shook his head. "Not in Salinas. It's no place

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for Helen an' the kid. I'll get transferred in another month or so, maybe to Eagle Pass or Brownsville. I'll have 'em with me then, you bet."

"Sure a good-lookin' baby," Taffy commented. "Seein' that picture kind of makes me wish I was a family man myself."

When he left Constable and strolled back toward Renaud's, the picture was still on Taffy's mind. He had every white man in Salinas catalogued now and except for Constable, and perhaps Renaud, there wasn't a one worth shooting. Renaud seemed fairly honest and was a cheerful cuss, and Constable was a good boy.

Taffy had chosen to return along the inland side of the town. His reflections were broken into by the sudden appearance of a horseman pushing out from the settlement. The man rode furtively, not along the road but into the brush, as though anxious to screen himself. Taffy could not positively identify the rider but thought it was Castro, and he wondered why Castro would be sneaking out of Salinas. Maybe, he thought, grinning at the idea, Castro was his horse thief. Castro looked like a man that would use a knife.

BACK at Renaud's, waiting for dinner, Taffy saw the salt wagons coming into town. The oxen plodded slowly past, the drivers, dusty, surly, and tired. Taffy lifted his hand to the bright-eyed youngster who had questioned him, and the gesture was returned. The big man who had advocated Taffy's death, scowled darkly.

"Where'd you ever run into Vallejo?" asked Renaud, who had been standing beside Taffy.

"Is that his name?" Taffy countered.

"The one that waved is Miguel Vallejo. The big one's Blas Biscante. There's goin' to be some trouble, Menifee."

"Trouble?" Taffy's voice was mild.

"When Owen tries to collect for that salt." Renaud's face was gloomy. "Miguel an' Blas kind of lead the Mexicans an' Blas' uncle, old Epiminio, is *alcalde* over in Colonial Torres. Blast these fellers from Austin that come out here an' stir things up. I wish Owen had stayed at home."

Renaud went into his establishment and Taffy, having watched the salt wagons out of sight, strolled around the building to look after Buttons. He was in the shed when Castro came up, leading a saddled horse.

"Pretty good day for a ride," drawled Taffy.

Castro ignored the friendly words. Stripping the saddle from his mount, he dumped it down, and his face was a mask of vindictive satisfaction. Taffy strolled away. Whatever Castro had done, wherever he had been, he had accomplished what he had set out to do; Taffy would bet on it. He would bet, too, that Castro's errand had been a nasty one, nasty for somebody other than Pinto Castro.

After dinner Taffy took a siesta in the *jacal*. He was in no particular hurry, having learned in his lifetime to let the other fellow make the breaks. One break had already been made, as the knife in Taffy's boot plainly said. There would be other breaks and Taffy believed that he could capitalize on them and find his horse thief. Stretching out on the pallet, he slept, waking when he heard voices. Rising, he shook his clothes into place, and left his quarters. There was a crowd in

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front of the cantina and, pushing through it, Taffy entered the barroom. Owen was confronting a defiant Miguel Vallejo at the bar.

"We have always dug salt from Laguna Sal," declared Vallejo. "We always will! The salt belongs to El Rancho de Santa Inez and has been made free to us." His voice rang with conviction.

Beyond Vallejo Taffy saw Blas Biscante, his face dark with anger. Castro was in the crowd, as was Gerber, but the sheriff was notable by his absence, and Woodward, his deputy, also was missing.

Owen's face was flushed with anger and drink. "Yo're goin' to pay me for the salt or go to jail!" he told the Mexican in a rasping voice.

"I will go to jail!" Miguel glanced expectantly toward Castro.

"Yo're doggoned right you will!" Owen snarled. "An' before you go I'm goin' to learn you yore manners! You Mexican *pelados* think you can get away with anythin'. I'll learn you different!" He cocked his big fist and advanced a step, ready to strike. Vallejo straightened, preparing to defend himself against a man twice his weight.

Taffy did not see Blas Biscante crouch and make ready. His eyes were on the principal actors and anger rose in him. He hated to see a man pick on a smaller man, and he despised a bully. Impetuously Taffy took a hand in affairs.

"Hold it!" he commanded, striding forward. "Don't hit the kid, Owen!"

Owen wheeled, his eyes angry under his beetling brows. "This ain't none of yore business," he snapped. "What are you buttin' in for?"

"Because I'm makin' it my business," answered Taffy. "You hit the kid an' I'll take you apart! Maybe you can have the kid arrested—I ain't sure of that—but I'm mighty sure you can't beat him up!"

THERE was a certainty in Taffy's voice and stance that stopped Court Owen. Taffy was not as big as Owen, but his eyes glittered and his broad shoulders bunched and the lines on his face were deep carved into a fighting mask. Too, the big gun on Taffy's hip was not to be disregarded.

"I'd like to know what business this is of yores!" Owen blustered.

"I've told you." Taffy's voice held a steely ring.

For an instant Owen hesitated, then, glaring truculently at Taffy, he wheeled and stalked to the door. The crowd parted to give him passage. Tension lessened as Owen cleared the door, and a man laughed. Miguel Vallejo, at Taffy's elbow, said: *"Gracias, señor."*

"Es nada," Taffy answered, and walked over to the bar.

For a long time Taffy drank bitter home-brewed beer in preference to Renaud's whiskey, and watched the door. Owen was not the man to take what had happened, lying down. He would, Taffy felt sure, come back looking for trouble. In the back of his cool mind the idea amused Taffy. Here he was, come to look for a horse thief, and butting into troubles that were not his own. He saw Castro scowling at him and grinned at the man. Gerber, standing beside Castro, was pallid and sweating. Taffy wondered what Gerber's stake in this was.

The bar on either side of Taffy was clear, and the men in the room stayed along the outside wall. They, too, expected Owen to return, and were determined to be present when the showdown came. Miguel Vallejo and big Blas were at the end of the bar as though they intended to side

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Taffy in the fight. Taffy winked at Miguel and set his empty beer glass on the bar. The door darkened swiftly and was filled by Owen's Big body. He had a gun in his hand.

"Now, by Jupiter," Owen rasped, "we'll see about this!" He was looking at Taffy and the gun started up.

Taffy moved catlike along the bar, his hand dipping to his weapon. Owen had given him no break, but that was to be expected. Taffy had faced a drawn gun before this and was still walking around. The long .45 slithered out of its leather and came up, and as the gun cleared a shot roared in the cantina. Taffy, braced to meet the shock of lead, felt nothing. Smoke bloomed about Owen, and Gerber, leaping forward, interposed himself between Taffy and the big man. Miraculously Taffy stayed his finger on the trigger and at the end of the bar a man whimpered. Gerber held Owen in a tight grasp and Taffy turned his head. At the bar end Miguel Vallejo slumped in Blas Biscante's arms.

For an instant amazement filled Taffy and then realization came. Owen had come back to settle his account and had chosen to pay Miguel first. Tearing his eyes from Miguel, Taffy wheeled to face Owen. Pasters, the sheriff, and Woodward, his deputy, came storming through the door and the crowd swarmed in between Taffy and his intended target. A man screamed: *"Muerto! Muerto!"*

Taffy surged ahead, thrusting men from his path. He reached Owen. The man's face was blankly white and his eyes wide as though he was dazed. Gerber had been supplanted by Pasters and Woodward who flanked the big man. Woodward had twisted Owen's gun from his hand and Paster's voice rose hysterically:

"Hold it! Hold it, now! I've got him under arrest. He's my prisoner!"

Woodward and Pasters backed toward the door, pulling the befuddled Owen with them. In the cantina the crowd milled, clustered about Vallejo and Biscante, cutting Taffy off from the door. He saw the officers draw their man out and disappear.

Wheeling, Taffy thrust his way toward the bar end where he stared down at Miguel's face. The Mexican's brown eyes were wide with pain and his breath came in gasps.

"He ain't dead!" Taffy rasped. "Get him out of here where he can be looked after! Get somebody to look after him!"

CHAPTER V

DESPERATE ALLIES

BROWN-SKINNED men moved Miguel Vallejo from Renaud's cantina. A crowd remained in the saloon. There was a great deal of talk and excitement, for every man had seen the shooting and every man had a different version. Some of them tried to talk to Taffy with little luck. Taffy was puzzled. He had seen Owen's bewildered face after the shot and he had seen the big man's gun as well, and no smoke had come from the weapon. Owen had meant to settle matters with Taffy Menifee but he had not—or so Taffy was convinced—shot Vallejo. Someone else had done that and Taffy tried to puzzle it out but could not place the men who had been in the room, most of whom were strangers to him. Shrugging off questioners, he went out to learn how badly Miguel was hurt.

The natives Taffy questioned were surly and he got little information. A crowd was forming about the nearby house to which Miguel had

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been taken. Presently men entered that crowd, shouting in Spanish that Father Peña was not at the church, that he had gone to the Santa Inez ranch. The crowd boiled and there was much noisy talk which quieted as Blas Biscante took charge. Miguel was loaded into a wagon drawn up in front of the house and, with Biscante and some others riding beside it, the wagon rolled away. Taffy went back into Renaud's.

He was in the barroom when Gerber and Castro entered. The storekeeper was plainly upset, but Castro was as smoothly sanguine as ever.

"Pasters put Owen in my storeroom," Gerber informed Taffy. "I dunno what they're goin' to do. Is Judge Valdez in here? Pasters wants him.

The judge was not in Renaud's and Gerber and Castro departed. Taffy hung about, waiting, listening to the talk, seeing how things shaped up. Gradually most of the natives filtered out to Renaud's and only the Anglos remained. Taffy, counting them, saw that there were, with himself, just ten men. Gerber, Castro and Owen would make thirteen. Thirteen men of one breed and some hundreds of another. It didn't look good. Leaving Renaud's, Taffy walked toward the church.

Everywhere he saw scowling faces. The natives were circulating, gathering into groups, talking, whipping their anger, and Taffy began to think that he had not done too well in leaving Renaud's cantina.

At the rectory he knocked and waited until a timid voice demanded his identity. Taffy gave it and asked for Father Peña. The voice answered that the padre had gone to El Rancho de Santa Inez. A man had been hurt there and the priest had been called to go to him. Taffy asked who had been hurt and was informed that a horse had injured the O'Hara foreman.

That meant that Shue had tried to get into Brian Boru's stall. Taffy suppressed a grin as he left the rectory and returned to Renaud's.

The Anglos were still assembled there. Gerber and Castro had returned, and there were half a dozen natives. Plainly the crowd in Renaud's cantina was thoroughly scared. Listening to their talk, Taffy learned that many natives were crossing the river to Salinas. Epiminio Biscante, Blas' uncle and *alcalde* of Colonial Torres, had arrived, and the crowd could readily become a mob. While that word was still in the air, Sheriff Pasters came in.

The lawman, white-faced and breathless, wore a badge and gun, but that was all. There was nothing behind the emblems of his office, no fighting man, nothing, and Taffy knew it.

"They're down at Gerber's," Pasters almost panted. "After Owen. By glory they can have him as far as I'm concerned. I ain't goin' to get myself killed over that fool."

Renaud rapped: "Where's Giles?" and Taffy realized that Woodward had not come with Pasters.

"He stayed," Pasters answered. "I told him to come along, but he stuck with Owen, the fool!"

DELIBERATELY, then, Taffy let his eyes roam around the barroom. What he saw wasn't pleasant, for it is never pleasant to see a frightened man. Taffy gave his gun belt a hitch and a tug and grinned slowly, trying to find a response in those frightened faces.

"I expect," he said finally, "we'd better go back with the sheriff an' bring Owen down here. That's what

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you come for, wasn't it, Pasters? To get some help?"

Pasters did not answer. Fright clung to eyes and lips and indecisive chin.

Taffy started toward the door. "I'll just slide down an' help," he stated, and went out.

Taffy took his time going to Gerber's. Knots of men on the street muttered and cursed and scowled and threatened as he strolled along. His heart bumped his ribs and his stomach was a knot, but he kept going. Reaching Gerber's, Taffy pushed through the sullen crowd and called to Woodward.

The deputy let him in. "What'd you come down here for?" he demanded.

"I thought mebbe we'd better take Owen up to Renaud's," Taffy answered.

Owen had lost his bluster but he was brave enough. "I'll be killed," he said. "I didn't shoot Vallejo, but they'll kill me just the same. You boys pull out."

Taffy questioned Woodward with his eyes and the deputy shrugged.

"I'm not much force," said Woodward, "but I ain't pullin' out. Mebbe I am a horse thief, but I won't quit a white man."

"Then it was you that took Brian Boru?" Taffy drawled.

Woodward nodded, and Taffy laughed almost gleefully. "An' I had Castro, an' even the sheriff, picked out," he said. "Don't tell me that you was the gent that come after me with a knife."

"No," Woodward, said flatly. "Not me. I figured we'd have to settle, but I don't use a knife."

Taffy nodded his satisfaction. "I thought not," he stated. "You told the sheriff who I was, though, didn't you?"

"Him an' Renaud," admitted Woodward.

"Then one of them's the knifer," Taffy stated. "I'm kind of glad to get that settled. They ain't quite ready outside. If we walk out of here we might make it to Renaud's. Come on, Owen."

Owen, not yet ready to leave the sheltering walls of Gerber's store, would have argued.

"We ain't got time to stall," Taffy announced curtly. "It's now or not at all." He placed his hand on the door latch.

"It'd be a shame to have you walk back alone," drawled Woodward. "I'll go with you." Owen hesitated another instant and then, as Taffy opened the door, moved to follow.

The walk back to Renaud's was a crazy thing, a foolhardy, wild-eyed piece of insanity. Woodward and Taffy flanked Owen and only their cool hardness prevented tragedy. Several times during that walk Taffy pushed through knots of dark-faced, furious men, forcing a passage. Owen was ready to collapse, and Woodward, when the walk was half done, said that they would never make it.

"We *will* make it!" Taffy refuted. "Keep yore hand off yore gun an' keep walkin'."

Woodward grunted at the order but obeyed, and after what seemed an eternity, they reached Renaud's. Renaud himself threw open the door, and when they were inside, Owen slumped to the floor in a dead faint.

"Me," Woodward said, and strain showed in his voice, "I'm goin' to have a drink. How about you, Menifee? You care to drink with a horse thief?"

"Why," drawled Taffy, "I don't mind if I do."

He was at the bar when Castro

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Angered by Shue's foul tactics, Taffy went to work with a ferocity that brought a scream from Gertrudis.

and Gerber came pushing up. Castro's face was savage, and Gerber was pale and worried.

"Why did you want to bring him here?" Castro snarled. "Those Mexicans will get him. Now they'll get the whole bunch. Why didn't you leave him where he was?"

Taffy, glass in hand, wheeled to face them. He saw condemnation on every face, and in him resolution hardened with scorn and came to life in words.

"You chicken-gutted bunch of yellow pups! I could take a mouthful of liquor an' spit a better man than any one of you. Back up an' let a man take a drink!"

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Shifting his eyes from Castro's snarling face, Taffy raised his glass toward Woodward. The deputy, with a wry grimace, lifted his own glass and the two men drank to each other.

WHISKEY and water, one put into him, the other thrown in his face, brought Owen to consciousness and he sat on a bench and stared dully at the men who crowded around him. Questions were rasped and Owen's answers were as dull as his eyes. "I never shot Vallejo. I don't know who done it, but I never shot him."

Pasters attempted to give orders but no one paid any attention to him. It was not until Taffy drawled that someone had better watch, that guards were established at the doors and windows. And now, as dusk came, spirits began to rise. There was bragging in Renaud's cantina, and some loud talk.

"Blasted gutless yellow bellies!" Pasters snarled. "They know they can't get to us. They ain't even goin' to try. How about some supper, Renaud?"

The word was echoed. Because no immediate attempt had been made on their fort, the men took heart. Renaud even ventured out to the woodpile and returned with fuel. Supper was eaten, night came, and still Salinas held its brooding peace. Only, from small glassless windows, sullen men could be seen watching the building, and after a while Taffy drew Woodward aside.

"You an' me," he said, "had better split up. Them boys outside ain't done. They ain't even started."

Woodward nodded curtly and so through the hours of dusk and on into the night, Taffy and the man who had stolen his horse, split the watch. Oddly they had confidence in each other and only in each other.

At midnight, while Taffy was trying to get a little sleep, Woodward wakened him. Taffy sat up, gun in hand, and then seeing that it was the young deputy, relaxed, but only for an instant. Woodward's growling words brought him to his feet.

"Castro's gone! I had him watchin' the door an' he's slipped out to join 'em, the dirty, yellow traitor!"

"Join 'em?" questioned Taffy. "How do you know?"

"He tried to get two of the Mexican boys to go with him. He told 'em he was goin' to throw in with Biscante an' the rest."

This was bad, very bad. Only the lack of a leader had kept the men in Renaud's cantina safe from attack so far. With Pinto Castro to lead, the mob would storm the cantina. Taffy whistled a long, low note.

"That's what I thought," Woodward said grimly. "What had we better do, Menifee? Get the bunch an' make a run for it?"

Taffy shook his head. "We'd never make it," he said. "Where could we run to?"

"Tres Cruces is up the valley. We could—"

"That's a hundred miles. We wouldn't go ten. We'll hang an' rattle right here."

"An' have hell," Woodward prophesied. "I wish Father Peña would show up."

"Why?"

"Because he could handle 'em. He'd quiet 'em down. Listen, you can hear 'em outside now!"

Indeed a sullen, growling murmur penetrated into Renaud's cantina. The mob was not resting, not sleeping. It was surging restlessly. All Salinas was awake.

"They been doin' that for quite a while," Woodward said. "Cas-

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tro's got plenty of friends amongst the Mexicans. Now he'll stir 'em up an'—"

"They won't start before daylight," Taffy said cheerfully. "It'll take 'em that long to get good an' drunk, an' for Castro to whip 'em into line. Do you reckon that one of them Mexican braves we got with us would take a chance?"

"Any of 'em would," Woodward assured him. "They're pretty good boys. Why?"

"Because Father Peña's at the Santa Inez ranch. If one of these boys could get word to him—"

"Why, sure!" Woodward caught the idea. "Sure!"

"A white man couldn't make it," Taffy stated reflectively. "It'll have to be a Mexican, somebody that can talk the language an' just kind of filter through."

WOODWARD could see Taffy's point. "I'll get one of 'em started right now," he said.

"Wait! Better let 'em all go. That way, if one don't make it, another will."

"Sure." Woodward nodded again. "An' they'd better go now, while it's still good an' dark."

The natives who had stayed in the cantina listened to Woodward expound the idea. Once they understood it they were eager enough as indeed were some of the Anglos. Taffy and Woodward laughed grimly at these.

"You'd head north an' that's the last we'd hear of you," Woodward told one aspirant. "You want to save yore own hide! You try to bust out of here an' I'll kill you before you reach the door. Go on! Try it!"

"No need of that," Taffy said quietly, turning from the native boy to whom he had been giving instructions. "Listen!"

As though in answer to the command a shout went up outside the cantina, a deep-throated roar like the blood bellow of cattle. The man who had wanted to leave, grew white and turned away.

One by one the natives slipped away through the back door. Taffy and Woodward and all the others in Renaud's listened but could hear no change in the sounds outside. Fifteen minutes after the last man had gone, Taffy was satisfied.

"They got away," he said, grinning. "That's good as far as it goes. Now if one of 'em will just make it through to the Santa Inez maybe Father Peña will come."

"An' maybe he won't," said Woodward.

"An' maybe if he does come he won't do any good," Taffy drawled. "This is the devil of a jam to be into over a little salt." His laugh was grim and Woodward joined it.

"All that we got to do now," Woodward declared, "is wait till mornin'. Let's get a cup of coffee. Renaud's got some made."

CHAPTER VI

BACK-SHOOTING BADGE TOTER

CHEERLESS morning broke and in Renaud's cantina sleeping men roused stiffly to join their fellows who watched at doors and windows. The sun came up and long shadows grew, flanked by brilliant light. In the night a fortification had been raised in front of the cantina, a low barricade of wood and dirt. Renaud, entering from the kitchen, said that the back door was similarly guarded.

"I was goin' out after water," he explained. "But when I seen that fort I changed my mind."

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"How are we off for water?" Taffy demanded.

Renaud shook a gloomy head.

The day grew older and in the cantina impatience also grew. Inactivity was galling. The watchers could see no one, but there was sound plenty, gibes, taunts called from behind the breastworks, threats and promises. Presently a voice broke through these, calling to Pasters.

"Señor. Señor Pasters!"

"Ol' Epiminio Biscante," Woodward growled. "Answer him!"

Pasters shouted that he was listening, and a dirty white rag waved back and forth above the barricade.

"They want a truce," Taffy declared. "All right. Talk to 'em, Pasters."

"What do you want?" Pasters shouted.

White-haired and dignified, Epiminio answered by rising from behind the barricade and he made his wishes clearly known. They wanted Gerber, and Court Owen who had murdered Miguel Vallejo. If these men were not surrendered to them, Epiminio said, they would come and take them. Pasters turned from the window and in Renaud's barroom men looked at each other with questioning eyes.

"By thunder he means it," Pasters declared suddenly. "You've got to go out, Owen. You an' Gerber!"

Gerber crouched against the wall but Owen faced Pasters. "If that's what it takes, I'm ready," the big man said. "I—"

"Shut up!" Taffy said curtly. "What do you think we are? Yellow?"

"They got to get out." Renaud flanked the sheriff and glared at Taffy. "I won't have my place wrecked because of a couple of confounded fools."

Taffy eyed the owner of the cantina and under the stare Renaud turned his head. From Renaud Taffy turned to Pasters. "They ain't goin' out an' we ain't goin' to give 'em up," he said flatly. "An' while we're talkin', which one of you two skunks tried to knife me the other night? You, Pasters?"

Both Renaud and the sheriff showed surprise and guilt on their faces. Taffy's laugh was a mirthless bark. "Both of you!" he declared. "All right. I'll settle with you both when this is over. Right now we need every man we got. You climb back up there an' tell the old man— No! I'll do it myself!"

Thrusting Pasters away from the window, Taffy called to the men outside, delivering a vigorous refusal to the demands. His voice had hardly ceased before the firing began. Bullets whizzed through the windows and thudded against the door planks, and Taffy, wheeling, spoke harshly to Renaud and Pasters.

"You better get to work! You're in this as much as any of us now!"

The firing continued. Woodward, standing besides Taffy, grinned wryly. "They won't keep it up," he prophesied. "There's three feet of adobe in the walls an' the door's thick. They'll not waste powder."

ALMOST as though Woodward had commanded it, the firing ceased. Taffy pulled a bench to the window and mounted carefully to peer out. "They're drawin' off," he reported. "They—" Lead chipped adobe from the window's edge and Taffy came down swiftly, a sheepish grin on his face. "Some of 'em are pullin' out," he amended. "There's some left, I guess."

Woodward took a turn on the bench. "I can see Epiminio an'

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Castro," he stated. "They—" He lifted his pistol cautiously. "Too dang far for a short gun," he completed regretfully. "They're movin' now. There they go, out of sight." He, too, came down from his observation post. "I'd sure like to have got a shot at Castro," he said when he joined Taffy.

Taffy nodded absently. He was staring at Owen and Gerber. "What I'd like to know is why they wanted you, Gerber," he said thoughtfully. "I can sabe why they want Owen, all right. They think he shot Vallejo. But why they want Gerber—"

"I never shot Vallejo!" Owen denied. "I come in here to settle with you, Menifee."

"That's what I thought." Taffy kept his eyes on the fat man. Even though they were caught by the same circumstance, he did not trust Owen.

Owen sensed that. "I ain't goin' to try to get even now," he rumbled. "It's called off. But you'd better watch Pasters. He's got his eye on you."

That, Taffy thought, was true. The sheriff and certain others had drawn apart and were talking in low voices.

Woodward's eyes glinted. He lifted his voice to call across the room. "Pasters!"

The sheriff turned.

"I just want to tell you," Woodward called, "if you make a try for Menifee, you'd better get me at the same time. I told him about stealin' his horse an' about the knife business. Him an' me are together."

"Thanks," Taffy drawled. His admiration for this horse thief was rising momentarily. Woodward was crooked as a dog's hind leg and as good a man as Taffy wanted to side him in a tight.

"That's all right." Woodward grinned.

Once again Taffy turned to Gerber, pursuing his curiosity. "Why did they want you to come out, Gerber?" he repeated.

"It's Castro," snarled Gerber. "He's the one."

Woodward's eyes were bright. "You an' Castro have throwed together for quite a while," he drawled. "He wouldn't want you outside so that he could take care of you, would he? He wouldn't be figurin' to save yore hide an' kill the rest of us?"

Gerber shook his head. "It's the maps!" he blurted. "Castro wants the maps."

"What maps?"

Gerber shook his head. He had recovered his senses and knew that he had said too much.

"You'll tell us," Taffy warned, "or I'll shove you outside myself. There's somethin' mighty funny here, Woodward. What maps are you talkin' about, Gerber? What's this all about?"

"It's about Laguna Sal," explained Woodward. "That blasted salt lake. The Mexicans have always used—"

"I know that!" Taffy was impatient. "I want to know the rest. Are you an' Gerber hooked up, Owen?"

Owen nodded slowly. He was desperate, for he believed that he had reached the end of his string and his only safety lay with Taffy Menifee and Giles Woodward. Pasters and the others, with the possible exception of Jack Constable, would throw him to the wolves; they would turn him over to the Mexicans to save their own worthless hides. Only Taffy and Woodward were strong enough to cope with Pasters and his followers. "We're all in this together," Owen declared hoarsely.

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"Gerber an' me an' Castro. Castro was supposed to handle the Mexicans."

LITTLE by little the sorry story came out. Owen told some of it and Gerber, seeing that nothing could be done by hiding information, added bits of detail.

"And so," Taffy drawled, when the recitation was completed, "you stole land that didn't belong to you an' got all this ruction started. You blasted hawgs!"

He paused a moment, staring bleakly at Gerber and Owen. "An' you call yoreselves white men!" he said bitterly. "I've got to stick with you because you got a white skin! How come that Castro let Biscante an' Vallejo go up to Laguna Sal if he's so all-fired strong with the Mexicans? Couldn't he handle 'em?"

"He couldn't handle Vallejo an' Biscante," Gerber returned. "They're the ones that were against him. He said that we'd have trouble with those two."

Again Taffy was silent as he indulged in thought. "That's it!" he said suddenly. "You didn't shoot Vallejo, Owen. Castro did!"

"Castro?" Woodward echoed the name in surprise.

"Castro!" Taffy said firmly. "I remember him as bein' by the door when Owen come in gunnin' for me. Castro shot Vallejo. He knew the Mexicans would think Owen did it an' he figured they'd kill Owen. He was smart. He was goin' to get rid of both his partners."

"An' take Laguna Sal," Owen rumbled. "He's got salt on the brain. Him an'—"

"Look out!"

The warning yell came from a man beside a window. There was no time for more deliberation. Once again the guns outside took up their pounding.

There was a difference in this assault. Apparently something had been planned. The shooting was deliberate and the rifles swept the windows. No man dared rise up to return the fire. And now, mingled with the sound of the guns came another noise, a deliberate thumping against the blank north wall.

Taffy interpreted the thumping, as did all the others in Renaud's. Men were using picks on the north wall. The adobe was thick but it could not withstand this assault and after a time when the foundation of the wall had been mined, it would crumble and, with the roof, come crashing down. The attackers had kept the windows clear so that some of their number could get to the wall with tools. It was now just a question of time before Renaud's became untenantable.

Pasters, flanked by three men, crossed to Taffy and Woodward. The sheriff's fright added to his determination and, confronting Taffy, he made his declaration. "Owen and Gerber are goin' to have to give themselves up. The rest of us ain't goin' to stay in here an' be killed because of them two. They've got to give up!"

Taffy eyed Pasters sardonically. "I say they don't have to," he drawled. "We'll call a showdown right here. How far do you want to go, Pasters? Do you want to take it up with me?"

The sheriff decidedly did not want to take it up with Taffy Menifee. The sheriff was between the millstones. He was afraid of the men outside; he was equally afraid of Taffy. Taffy had force and drive and was a leader. Pasters knew that before he could throw Gerber and Owen to the wolves, he must deal

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with Taffy Menifee, and he was not ready to do that. He lowered his eyes.

Taffy laughed tightly. "You'll stay in here an' fight," he declared evenly. "The two of them ain't worth dyin' for, but they're white men an', by gravy, you'll act like a white man an' stay with 'em. Now get back an' watch that wall, an' if a pick comes through you put about four slugs right around its point. Get gone!"

PASTERS wheeled and walked away, followed by two of his companions. Only Jack Constable remained. The customs man met Taffy's eyes.

"I came along with Pasters to back you if you needed it," Constable said quietly. "It was none of my doin's, Menifee. I knew what you'd tell Pasters and I thought maybe you'd need some help." He, too, departed.

Taffy, staring after the customs man, remembered the proudly displayed tintype of the curly-haired wife and the little girl. And Jack Constable was to die because of a couple of worthless thieving cheats! It wouldn't do. It just wouldn't do.

"I'm goin' to talk to them men outside," Taffy declared suddenly. "Where are those maps you stole, Gerber? Maybe I can make a trade. Maybe I can call this off!"

"They're in the store. In my strong box under the counter."

"Give me the key to the box!" Taffy held out his hand. "I'm goin' to dicker with 'em. We'll try tradin' a lake full of salt for our lives."

Reluctantly Gerber produced a key. Taking it, Taffy stepped to the bench and called, demanding a truce. He made himself heard and the firing died away. Pasters and his followers drew up behind him as Taffy came down from the bench.

"So yo're goin' to give 'em up?" Pasters demanded. "You've come to my way of seein' things?"

"I'm not goin' to give 'em up an' I'll never come to yore way of thinkin'," Taffy declared. "I'm goin' out to dicker with 'em. I've got somethin' to trade. Now unbar that door an' let me out!"

Reuaud unbarred the door. Holding Gerber's key tightly in his hand, Taffy called that he was coming out, and followed immediately after the words. Deliberately he strode toward the breastworks, and as he moved, Epiminio Biscante and Pinto Castro rose up.

Inside Renaud's the besieged men thronged to the openings. They saw Taffy approach the breastworks and Epiminio and Castro move to meet him. Pasters, at a window, whipped up his gun. The sheriff was a coward and he wanted to save his own hide. Taffy Menifee was the only obstacle in the way. More than this, Taffy had threatened to settle with Pasters for attempting to kill him in the *jacal*. It was personal revenge as well as fright that motivated the sheriff.

"Watch Giles Woodward," Pasters growled to Renaud. "I'll get that crazy fool out of the way." He leveled the long Colt at Taffy's back and pulled the trigger. Taffy went down as though struck by a lightning bolt, and Biscante and Castro ran for the barricade.

Woodward, watching Taffy, was caught by surprise. For an instant after Taffy fell, he stood motionless, then with a snarl he pulled his own gun and whirled on the sheriff. Woodward fired one shot and Pasters toppled from the bench. Renaud, swinging up his shotgun, emptied both buckshot-loaded barrels, and Woodward, caught squarely by both

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loads, folded forward, dying as he struck the floor.

CHAPTER VII

HELP FROM THE SANTA INEZ

AT the Santa Inez ranch Blas Biscante hovered over his friend, Miguel Vallejo. The latter was weak from loss of blood and bullet shock, but Father Peña insisted that he would not die. Indeed the good padre gave Miguel every chance to live; but he was not so cheerful when he spoke of Bart Shue.

There had been much hot discussion between Bart Shue and Gertrudis O'Hara after Taffy's departure. At first Gertrudis was deeply concerned about her foreman, but when the girl realized that Taffy's beating was not so serious as she had thought, anger took the place of concern.

Helplessly, Taffy watched as rifles cracked again and Court lurched and fell.

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Shue was in no condition to talk at the moment. He needed repairs and two vaqueros who had witnessed the fight, helped the foreman to his quarters. There they bandaged his skinned hands and face, rubbed ointment on the various bruises, and put the foreman to bed. Gertrudis did not see Shue or question him that day, and the next day being Sunday, the foreman also had a respite while the mistress of the Santa Inez attended church.

The respite was only temporary. When Gertrudis O'Hara returned she went directly to the adobe her foreman occupied. She had seen Taffy Menifee as she left the church and her confidence in both herself and Shue was shaken. The interview that followed was stormy. Shue swore that he had bought the horse honestly, that Brian Boru had not been stolen, and that the brand had not been worked over. Perforce, Gertrudis took his word for those things, but her acceptance was only temporary. She wished to see again the brand on Brian's neck and when she left Shue she went to the barn but dared not enter the stallion's stall. The two men she took with her were afraid of Brian. They could handle the horse by using a pitchfork, but Gertrudis forbade that. She did not wish to injure the stud, regardless of whether or not he was stolen. So matters rested all day Sunday.

Bart Shue got out of his bed Monday morning. He knew that Giles Woodward had stolen Brian and he knew, too, that he himself had appropriated part of the purchase price. Woodward had offered the horse for two hundred dollars and Shue had asked for and received three hundred dollars from Gertrudis. He had been able to handle the stud for, despite his bullying, Bart Shue was a horseman and fearless where horses were concerned. Having dressed, he left his adobe and went down to the barn.

Just what he could do, Shue didn't know. Carrying a whip, he stepped into the stall, forced Brian over against the manger, and tied the horse. Then, laying the whip aside, he parted the mane to examine the brand on the stud's neck. Woodward had worked over the brand and Shue saw the loops that had turned the sevens into nines. The scab was gone from one loop but remained on the other, and Shue picked it off. He had the scab free and was ready to untie the horse when Brian Boru went into action.

A stud horse with a bad temper is as unpredictable as a summer thunderstorm. Brian had left Shue handle him, for he was whip broke. Now, seeing no whip in the foreman's hand, he jerked the tie rope free and, big teeth bared, reared and struck at Shue. The foreman, in dodging the blow, slipped and went down and the horse was on him immediately, striking and snapping at him with yellow teeth. Bart Shue managed to scream twice before a flying hoof hit his head and he lost consciousness. The screams brought help and, with the aid of a fork, the vaqueros drove Brian from his victim and got Shue out of the stall. Gertrudis, informed of what had occurred, ordered Bart Shue carried to the house where he lay hovering between life and death, and sent a man posthaste for Father Peña.

Father Peña, answering the summons, did what he could, but Shue had not regained consciousness when, Monday night, a wagon from town brought Miguel Vallejo to the Santa Inez.

Blas Biscante and two others stayed with Miguel while Father

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Peña attended the wound and then giving them instruction, returned to Shue.

GERTRUDIS had not left her foreman's bedside except for short intervals, and when Father Peña entered, she came to him.

"He has been talking," she said with a gesture of her head toward the man on the bed. "Mumbling in his sleep."

"Not sleep, child," Father Peña reproved. "He is unconscious. What does he say?"

The girl flushed. "He talks—There! He is talking now."

The priest hurried to the bed while Gertrudis lingered in the background. Shue's face was a pasty yellow in the candlelight, and his voice muttered curses and then spoke one coherent sentence. "Of course you stole the horse."

"He has said that over and over," Gertrudis stated. "I thought that the horse had been bought honestly, but I was mistaken. The man who was here was right. The stallion is his horse."

This called for explanations, and Gertrudis gave them while on the bed. Shue stirred restlessly. She told the priest of Taffy's visit to the ranch, of the altered brand on the stud's neck, and of the fight between Taffy and Shue.

"I saw him in Salinas Sunday," Gertrudis completed, speaking of Taffy. "Now I must find him and return his horse."

"He is a good man," Father Peña agreed. "You must give him back his horse."

"How do you know he is good?"

A slow smile came over the priest's face. "One knows such things," he answered. "Did you not feel it, too, my daughter?"

Gertrudis did not answer immediately. She blushed and her eyes would not meet the priest's. "He is a bold man," she returned. "He looked at me— No matter. I will return the horse."

Again Shue spoke, forcing his body up as his voice rasped. Both priest and girl turned to him. "The maps," Shue almost screamed. "Gerber, you've got to give me my share. I got the maps."

Father Peña was beside the man, and with his hand gently forced Shue back to the bed. The priest's eyes were worried as he looked at Gertrudis.

"You must leave us now," he said gently. "What follows will not do for you to see."

"You mean?"

Both priest and girl were speaking Spanish and Father Peña's voice was grave as he said: "He is dying."

For an instant Gertrudis hesitated and then, crossing herself, went out of the room. In the *sala*, kneeling before a *santo* niched in the wall, she prayed for Bart Shue. She was still kneeling and gray dawn was breaking when Father Peña came in. He waited until Gertrudis, finishing her devotions, arose and came to him. The priest nodded in answer to the question in her eyes."

"But the other one, Miguel," he said swiftly, "is sleeping and will get well. You, too, must sleep, my daughter. I will see that what is necessary is done.

Gertrudis demurred, but the priest insisted and so presently she lay in her bed, relaxed, thinking of what had happened, and thinking, too, of Taffy Menifee. She knew that Taffy was in Salinas, for she had seen him there and, too, Blas Biscante had told her of Taffy's part in the shooting of Miguel. Blas, big and rough, had risen to heights when he spoke

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of Taffy Menifee. In Blas' opinion Texans were no good, but there was bound to be an exception and, devoted to Miguel as he was, Blas praised Taffy for the part he had performed. With the big Mexican's words in her mind, Gertrudis drifted off to sleep.

THE sun was bright when she wakened. Ana, who had been her nurse and had served Gertrudis all her life, was in the room.

"What is it, Ana?" the girl demanded sharply.

Refusing a direct answer, the good servant bade her mistress lie down and sleep again, but Gertrudis sensed the woman's agitation. Rising, she dressed hastily and, entering the *sala,* found Blas Biscante there with Father Peña, two vaqueros of the ranch, and a disheveled little man who showed signs of hard travel and of fright.

"What is it?" Gertrudis demanded.

Father Peña turned to her. "Trouble," he said. "Much trouble in Salinas."

Biscante's face was unhappy. "*Mi tio* Epiminio—" he began.

Gertrudis was in no mood to hear about Blas' uncle. She wheeled on the messenger. "What is it?" she demanded again.

The little man, the only one of those dispatched by Taffy and Woodward, to win through, repeated his story for the girl. He spoke of the shooting of Miguel Vallejo, of how Taffy and Woodward had taken Owen from Gerber's store, of the siege of the cantina and Castro's defalcation. He had, he said, been stopped by the men of Salinas and only after many protestations and much pleading had he kept his life. As for the others who had been given the message— He spread his hands and shrugged. Perhaps they were alive, perhaps not.

Gertrudis turned to Father Peña with questioning eyes.

"I must go to Salinas," the priest said. "At once. I have asked that my team be hitched and my cart made ready."

Gertrudis wheeled to her vaqueros. "*Andale,*" she said. "*Andale.*"

The two riders started for the door. The girl halted them. "And saddle my horse," she ordered. "I go, too!"

There were expostulations at the announcement. Blas Biscante, following the riders to get his own horse, stopped and said that it would not do. Father Peña shook his head and offered remonstrances. It did no good. Gertrudis declared that if her horse was not saddled she would saddle him herself, and so the vaqueros left for the corrals.

"Daughter—" Father Peña began.

"It is my fault," Gertrudis interrupted. "Laguna Sal belongs to the O'Haras and even though it has been stolen by the Texans I am responsible."

Father Peña shrugged. He knew Gertrudis, had christened her, and he knew the O'Haras. Argument was of no avail.

"Come then," he said. "And hurry. We must hurry!"

CHAPTER VIII

PEACE FOR SALINAS

TAFFY MENIFEE lay in the sun. His head ached and throbbed and sand matted his hair. He did not move, being content for the moment to lie very still. He heard voices, and feet tramped by him, and still he remained quiet. Presently the voices diminished and there was no motion near him. He turned his head, the movement an effort, and blinked his eyes. From where he

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lay he could see the wall of Renaud's corral and he wondered if Buttons was all right. It was a shame the way he had treated the little horse. Buttons needed water and feed. Maybe he ought to look after the animal. The idea was good but perhaps he had better be quiet a while longer. Just now he wanted only to lie still and rest. After a time he would get up and look after Buttons.

With the thought came returning awareness. The things that had occurred, came back to him—the siege of the cantina, Pasters' fright, Woodward's grinning, beard-stubbled face. Odd that a horse thief should be the only man he could trust. Closing his eyes, Taffy waited, hoping that the ringing in his head would subside.

When he opened his eyes again there was motion beside the corral wall. The wall ran at an angle from Taffy's position and he could stare all along its length. At first he did not realize what it was that he saw. There was a crowd, an intervening open stretch, and then the wall. Men moved from the crowd to the wall and then returned, leaving one solitary figure in front of the adobe. The single man in front of the wall swayed and almost fell and there followed a sharp crackle of gunfire and the man went down. Taffy could hardly comprehend it as he watched a little group surge forward.

Again the wall was deserted save for a solitary figure standing straight and defiant beside the body crumpled at the wall's base. Taffy recognized Court Owen. He heard the crack of the rifle and saw Owen lurch and recover. He saw the big man's hands go to his shirt and tear it open, and he heard Owen's voice shouting.

Again the rifles jarred and Owen went down; a high, fierce yell was lifted. The mob surged forward, and Taffy, sick at what he had seen, closed his eyes and buried his face in the sand. After a time there came the tramp of many feet close by and the rumble of voices. The tramping stopped and a man said: "Here is one dead! No harm in him! We'll take the other, Epiminio."

That was Pinto Castro talking.

Epiminio's voice came in expostulation. "There is no harm in the others. Owen and Gerber are dead. The others go free."

"To take word of what has happened to the Rangers?" Castro rasped. "Do you want the Rangers to come and hang us all?"

Epiminio almost whimpered. A toe dug forcefully into Taffy's ribs, hurting like a branding iron, but he kept himself from flinching.

"Pasters is dead," Castro rasped. "Woodward, too. There is Renaud and Constable and—" The voices diminished as the men went on.

THAT kick was a spur to Taffy Menifee. Anger took the place of weakness and comprehension replaced haziness. He had seen Gerber and Owen executed. Woodward and Pasters were dead. Pinto Castro, blood-crazy, wanted to kill all the remaining Anglos. Forcing his eyes open, Taffy pushed against the ground and lifted himself. He sat up and blinked at the sunlight and the world that rocked and circled all about him. He heard someone yell: "Look! Look, Señor Castro!"

The long-barreled Colt was gone, lost in the sand, and Taffy could not find it. He saw Castro, followed by white-bearded Epiminio and others, come running from the cantina's gaping door. Castro's teeth were ex-

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posed in a snarl under his little waxed mustache, and Castro carried a gun. Something pressed hard against Taffy's leg and he remembered the knife. Castro stopped and glared down at Taffy and slowly the glare was replaced by a smile that was even more wicked.

"So?" Castro said smoothly. "So?"

Taffy could see that he was encircled by men, now. Castro, old Epiminio, other familiar faces. Jack Constable was there, held prisoner by two burly natives; and there were others who had been in the cantina. Taffy's hand rested on the haft of the knife in his boot and he looked up at Castro.

"So," he said, "you've killed Gerber and Owen, your partners." He spoke in Spanish and he saw the expression change on Epiminio's face. Taffy's words had identified Castro with the others. Pressing his advantage, Taffy continued.

"Gerber told me. I have the key. I can get the map you stole and give it back to Gertrudis. Laguna Sal belongs to the O'Haras still."

Castro strode forward until he stood just above Taffy, his gun in his hand. "Damn you!" he snarled, lapsing into English. "I'll shut you up, you—" The gun pointed at Taffy's hatless head and under Castro's thumb the hammer came back to full cock. As that calloused thumb contracted and the gun clicked, Taffy whipped the knife from its improvised sheath.

A fighting man, Taffy Menifee. A man who wasn't licked until he was dead, a man who used what he had, when he had it. The knife was sharp. The native smith who had fashioned it had curved the blade and cunningly tempered the steel. Taffy whipped the knife out and up, across Castro's leg, in one fierce slashing cut. Cloth and flesh parted beneath the blade, and Pinto Castro, hamstrung, the tendons that ran behind his knee severed by the cut, lurched and came down. The gun in his hand exploded, its bullet harmlessly scattering sand beside Taffy's leg.

As Castro fell, Taffy threw himself upon the man. There on the sand in front of Renaud's cantina the two twisted and squirmed, forming a fluid, struggling mass of flesh that defied identification of any part. Then a man screamed, chokingly, and a final convulsion came. The struggle ceased and, slowly, Taffy Menifee cleared himself of the body of the man he had killed, and sat up, the knife in his hand dripping blood.

"An' that," he said slowly, "pays for Woodward." Then, staring at Epiminio Biscante who stood, gun leveled, he spoke in Spanish. "*Tiro!* Shoot and finish it!"

There was wonderment in Epiminio's eyes and admiration, too, mingling with anger. For a moment he kept the gun level and then slowly lowered it. Taffy heard horses pounding across the sand but did not recognize the sound. His eyes met and clashed with those of the old man. Epiminio stood undecided and then there were shouts in the crowd and men scurried out of the way and a voice yelled: "No! No! *Tio!*" A horse shot past Taffy and came sliding to a halt, sending up a cloud of sand. The dust settled and through the haze Taffy saw a dress. He raised his eyes. The dress was topped by disheveled golden hair, and a voice, a sweet contralto, but angry now, made a declaration.

"You shall not kill him! You shall not!"

In Taffy the anger and the tension that held him up, broke and left him weak again. The knife

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dropped from his hand and, slowly, like a tree toppling, he relaxed, his outflung hand almost touching the man he had killed.

THEY carried Taffy Menifee into Renaud's and stretched him on the floor. Gertrudis, seated beside him, held his head in her lap and bathed the wound that Pasters' bullet had grooved along his skull. Someone brought *aguardiente* and Taffy swallowed a little and looked up at blue eyes. Blinking, he decided that he was surely dead and that an angel was looking after him. It puzzled Taffy, for he had always figured on another destination. Voices buzzed all around and he drank more whiskey and saw Padre Peña staring at him.

"Can you understand me?" the priest asked. "Where is this key? Gerber's key?"

"Pocket," said Taffy.

Deft hands searched him. His head was moved from its soft pillow and he felt himself lifted. The pallet that was slid under him was almost as hard as the floor and he roused and began to take interest in affairs. Jack Constable came and, squatting beside the hard bedding, spoke feelingly. "You done it, feller. You saved our bacon. They were going to kill us all."

"I saw—" Taffy managed, his voice growing stronger as the whiskey took hold. "Gerber an' Owen up—"

"Against the wall," Constable completed, and shuddered.

"What happened?" With returning strength came the old curiosity. "Who shot me?"

"Pasters. He cut you down when you walked out. Woodward settled Pasters, an' Renaud killed Woodward."

Taffy closed his eyes a moment. Woodward was dead. Taffy had liked that horse thief. Woodward stood hitched. A man didn't have to look back to find him."

"I had a shot at Renaud!" Constable's voice was grim. "I was a little late, but he'll murder no more men."

Silence followed the statement. Against the silence, voices murmured, grew louder until they filled the room. Taffy opened his eyes.

He saw Gertrudis first, old yellow papers in her hands. Father Peña was beside the girl, and big, dark-faced Blas Biscante. The room was full of men, and the priest was calling for silence. It came gradually and Gertrudis held the papers high and her voice pealed a triumph.

"This proves I own Laguna Sal. The lake belongs to me!"

Again came the babble of voices and the girl waved the paper while once more the priest called for quiet.

"It will be free!" Gertrudis called. "You can mine salt as you have always done. Laguna Sal will be free!"

A shout went up and Taffy's bandaged head rang with the noise. He could hardly hear Jack Constable. Father Peña pushed through and bent down to put his hand on Taffy's head.

"How do you feel, my son?" questioned the priest.

"Not so good," Taffy managed. "I don't quite get it."

The priest's smile was kind. "We will take you to Santa Inez," he announced. "I have a hospital there. Miguel is getting well and you will be company for each other. Bart Shue"—Father Peña's face was grave—"is dead—may his soul rest in peace—and Gertrudis knows now that the horse he bought was stolen from you, and she will return it to you. Today I will write for Rangers to come and settle all matters,

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and Gertrudis will have her land again. Now you must rest and be quiet."

Taffy was quiet. Father Peña left him, and Jack Constable was gone. Thoughts revolved in Taffy's mind, going around and around. Pinto Castro was dead, and so were Renaud and Pasters and Woodward; dead men all. But Jack Constable was alive and would go back to the curly-headed girl and the little kid that were on the tintype. That was something!

SENOR!" The voice was soft. Taffy opened his eyes. Gertrudis knelt beside him. "Señor!"

"*Si, señorita,*" Taffy said, and then, remembering: "Yes, ma'am."

"The horse is yours." Still Gertrudis spoke in Spanish. "I return him to you. I know now that he was stolen."

"Yes, ma'am," Taffy said again.

"And you have given me back my land and Laguna Sal, and put a stop to all this trouble."

Taffy thought that he was getting too much credit. He didn't say so. He kept his eyes on Gertrudis, and the girl flushed.

"Padre Peña says that you must stay until you are well again," she continued. "I would be very happy to have you as a guest at El Rancho." The words were stilled and Gertrudis' flush deepened.

"Me?" Taffy demanded. "A *Tejano?*"

Gertrudis turned her eyes away. She would not meet Taffy's look. Taffy moved slightly, touching the girl's hand. He was thinking again. Brian Boru was at the Santa Inez and Brian ought to go home. There was a *manada* awaiting Brian and an irascible, lovable old man named Menifee waiting for Taffy. But they could wait a while.

"Señorita—" Taffy began. "Ma'am—"

The blue eyes flashed humor, and Gertrudis looked at Taffy again and the red lips were curved sweetly and the rounded cheeks were flushed.

"You can talk Spanish, *Tejano,*" Gertrudis said. "Or English, if it pleases you."

Taffy's fingers closed around the small hand. It moved as though to free itself from the imprisonment and then was still.

"Yes, ma'am," Taffy said, and closed his eyes again. There were many words that he could use. Taffy's lips curved under his beard stubble as he thought of them: "*Amor*" and "*mi dulce corazon*" and "Sweetheart"—here was a lot of latitude in English and Spanish, a whole lot of words that a man might use in talking to a girl like Gertrudis O'Hara.

"I'll use 'em all," Taffy decided, and opened his eyes to meet Gertrudis' blue gaze once more.

THE END

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TRICKY TRIGGER

by Wayne D. Overholser

The moment Grinstead's eyes were off him, Lane hurled the bag. Grinstead's gun went off, but the shot was wild.

LANG CARNAY put his head out of the car window while the train slowly jarred to a stop. Not much of a burg, this town of Sunup, but that made little difference to Carnay. He'd be teaching the Bunchgrass Valley school fifteen miles from town. Still, he thought ruefully, he might be in Sunup permanently, or wherever the town's boothill was located. A week ago he'd received a curt letter from one Buck Grinstead, reading:

Don't teach the Bunchgrass school unless you want dirt throwed in your face.

Lang saw the two men standing in the station's long, afternoon shadow. One was an oldish, cadaverous-looking gent with brown, parchmentlike skin that made a tight fit over a bony face. The other was young, not so tall, and heavier of body, but he carried the same general resemblance to the other man that a son has to his father. Lang didn't think anything about the men being there until he got up from his green, plush seat, picked up his bag, and walked down the aisle. Then, when he stepped down from the car, both

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men moved toward him.

From the hostile expression on the oldster's face, Lang guessed he was Buck Grinstead. He saw there was a gun on the younger man's hip. A reception committee, Lang thought, and looked around for Sam Blake, the chairman of the school board, who was supposed to meet him. But nobody who looked as if he might be Sam Blake was in sight.

"You the schoolmarm for the Bunchgrass school?" the older man asked harshly.

Lang put down his bag. He was mild enough looking, this Lang Carnay, a slim-bodied, not very tall man with pale-blue eyes, a host of freckles, and a full-lipped mouth that had a natural upturn at the corners. Actually there was mighty little mildness in Lang Carnay's make-up, but his appearance had fooled more than one hard case, and it fooled the two men before him now.

"A schoolmarm wears skirts," Lang opined gently. "Me, I kind of favor pants. Just offhand, friend, I'd guess you were Buck Grinstead."

"How'd you know?" the cadaverous man snapped.

"I had a letter from a jasper named Grinstead. You look like the kind of a gent who'd write a measly letter like that."

"You're danged right," the oldster said harshly. "I'm Buck Grinstead, and this is my son, Dell. We ain't having no school at Bunchgrass. Git back on the train, Carnay."

"How do you figure on the kids in Bunchgrass Valley getting an education?" Lang asked softly.

"It don't make much difference to me," Grinstead snarled. "If the folks in Bunchgrass wants their kids ejicated, they can let 'em ride into Sunup."

"That's fifteen miles."

"It can be a hundred, Grinstead rasped. "I told you to git on the train."

"Getting kicked around is something I never liked, my friend," Lang said, his voice still gentle. "Reckon I won't take the train."

YOUNG Dell Grinstead spoke for the first time. "We say you're going, Carnay." His right hand flashed down and came up with his gun, a quick, expert draw. "Git on the train, schoolmarm," he snarled.

Lang shook his head sorrowfully. Dell Grinstead had stepped close to him, the cocked gun lined squarely on his middle. The man was a killer. It was there in the green sheen of his eyes, but this threat of death didn't change Lang Carnay's mind.

"That's a good argument you're holding in your hand," he said plaintively. "Right now I can't think of an answer."

Young Grinstead grinned at his father. "Now he's using his head. Maybe this schoolmarm ain't so—"

Lang had stooped to pick up his bag. For just a moment Dell Grinstead's eyes were away from him, and in that instant the bag came up from the ground and sailed squarely into young Grinstead's face. The gun roared, but the shot was wild.

Lang moved like a fury-charged bolt of lightning. He followed the bag through the air, landed a whistling right on the point of Dell Grinstead's chin and twisted the Colt from his suddenly relaxed fingers. Grinstead went down flat on his back.

Lang palmed the gun butt as he whipped back to face the older man. "Drop your iron," he barked.

Buck Grinstead had his .45 out of his shoulder holster, but surprise

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at Lang Carnay's unexpected action had momentarily stunned him. Now he was too late. He let the gun drop.

"Back up," Lang ordered.

Dell Grinstead was on his feet now, rubbing his chin, hate a savage thing on his sullen face. Both men moved back. Lang followed them to where Buck's gun lay, and slipped it into his waistband. Then he picked up his bag.

"You hombres got horses?" Lang asked.

Buck nodded. He said, "You're gonna be plumb sorrowful about this, schoolmarm."

"I don't like to be called 'schoolmarm' in case you hadn't figured it out," Lang said sharply. "Now head out for your broncs."

They moved around the station to where their horse were racked, Dell Grinstead cursing venomously, his father tight-lipped and silent. They mounted and went down the street in a flying cloud of dust. As Lang watched them, he heard the train jerk into a jolting start. He was mighty close to being on that train, he thought grimly.

Lang walked down the street that led to the town's one business block, stepped into the Emporium and bought a box of shells for the .45 that was in his bag.

"Have you seen Sam Blake?" he asked the clerk.

"Not today. I don't think—" The clerk looked through the window. "There he is now in that buckboard, just pulling up in front of the Silver Ball."

Lang put the shells in his pocket, and crossed the street to the buckboard. A pudgy, middle-aged man jumped down and held out his hand when he saw Lang.

"I'm looking for Lang Carnay. You him?"

"That's me." Lang nodded, and shook hands.

"I'm Sam Blake, and I'm sure regretful I didn't get to meet you at the train."

Lang told Blake what had happened at the station, and tossed the Grinsteads' guns into the seat of the buckboard. "That's their artillery. Maybe we'd just better keep it."

"Blast it!" Blake muttered angrily. "I don't know what Buck Grinstead's gonna do next. I've never seen an ornerier galoot in my life. I'm sure glad you turned the tables on 'em, Carnay. Maybe they'll let you alone."

Lang shook his head. "If I sized Buck Grinstead up right, I'd say my troubles are just starting."

BLAKE dropped Lang's bag into the buckboard. "Let's travel unless you want to get something in town."

"I'm done buying," Lang said. He climbed into the seat, and after Blake had turned the team and the town had dropped behind, he asked: "Why does Grinstead buck a school in Bunchgrass Valley?"

"I'm hanged if I know," growled Blake, "unless it's just because he's a crotchety old devil who's against anything anybody else wants." Taking a plug of tobacco out of his pocket, he bit off a chew. "It's a funny thing about Buck. A few few years ago he wasn't like he is now. He had a big outfit then. You'd run into stuff carrying his 4T iron clear down on the Ochoco. Then the drought got him. He lost everything he had but Black Wall Canyon and a couple of sections just outside the canyon mouth. That's where the school is. Nobody knows what he's got inside the canyon. He's

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built a fence along the mouth of the canyon. Don't reckon he's had a visitor in four years except some hard-looking strangers that drift by. Some folks think he makes a living by hiding out long riders that are just one jump ahead of the law."

"Must be something wrong," Lang said thoughtfully.

Blake spat over the wheel. "I reckon. The schoolhouse sets about a hundred yards from the canyon fence. Grinstead showed up at the last board meeting with some folks from Christmas Creek. They wanted us to build a new schoolhouse over there. That'd be about three miles from the canyon. We wouldn't do it 'cause the schoolhouse is in the center of the district now. Buck got mighty mad. Said he'd fix it so we wouldn't have a school. I see now what he meant. I'm sure glad you didn't scare off, young feller."

"I don't scare easy," Lang answered. "I'd say that Grinstead's into something he don't want folks to know about. He's afraid the kids might get through his fence and see something he don't want them to."

"I suppose that's what's biting him," Blake agreed, "but what d'you reckon he's doing?"

"That's something I aim to find out."

"Young feller," Blake said sharply, "you attend to your teaching. A dead teacher won't do us no good."

Lang Carnay couldn't have followed Blake's advice if he'd wanted to, for his and Grinstead's loops got tangled right on the first day of school. Lang stayed with the Blakes, and rode to school with their boy, fifteen-year-old Ed. In all, ten students showed up. Four of them were from the Adams family. They came in a buckboard driven by sixteen-year-old Paul Adams. There was one other boy, ten, and two girls, eight and seven.

"They're a new family," Ed Blake told Lang as they stood in front of the schoolhouse and watched the buckboard drive up. "Moved in last month on the Prouty place."

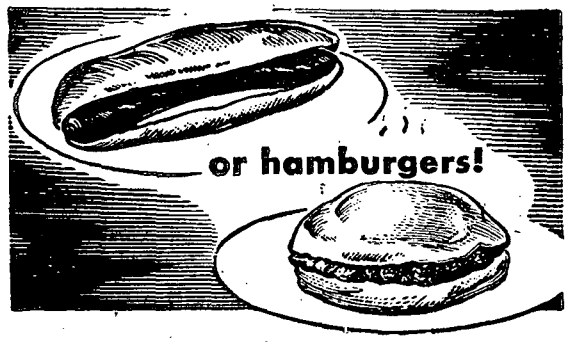
"Aren't they coming across Grinstead's land?" Lang asked.

"There's an old county road that comes through there, but it ain't been used much lately. Hard to tell what old Buck will say when he hears about it."

"He won't know about it, will he?" Lang asked. "Isn't his house up the canyon?"

Ed laughed. "Old Buck keeps an eye on a lot of things, teacher. His two boys, Dell and Ridge, change off watching there at the gate. In the daytime one of 'em stays on a ledge on the canyon wall. If any-

NO FINER DRINK . . . with hot dogs . . .



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body comes around the gate, he dusts 'em off with lead. He'll see them Adams kids, you bet, and he'll tell Buck."

ED BLAKE called it right. In less than an hour after school had taken up, Ed jumped out of his seat and raced up the aisle to where Lang sat at his desk listening to the Adams girls read.

"Ed, you can't—" Lang began, and stopped when he saw the boy's face.

"Take a peek out of the window, teacher," Ed whispered. "There's old Buck and his boy, Ridge. They sure look like they're loaded for bear."

Lang had his look and he didn't like what he saw. The Grinsteads had come through the gate in the fence across the canyon mouth, and were riding straight for the schoolhouse. Both of them carried Winchesters across their saddles, and Buck's bony face looked like a storm-angry thunderhead.

"Lottie, you and Ann may go back to your seats," Lang said casually. "The rest of you may study for a a few minutes."

"But, teacher—" Ed began, and stopped when Lang shook his head. Reluctantly the boy went back to the double seat where he sat with Paul Adams.

This was trouble, all right, Lang Carnay told himself as he walked down the aisle and out of the schoolhouse. He carried a gun in a leather-lined hip pocket specially made in his pants for just that purpose, but Buck Grinstead didn't know it, and this wasn't the time for Lang to demonstrate how fast he was on the draw, not with a schoolhouse full of kids.

Lang strode across the hard-packed earth of the schoolyard. When he was within ten feet of the Grinsteads, they reined up and he stopped. This Ridge Grinstead was younger than his brother, Dell, slim and bony-faced like Buck, but with a pair of ebony shoe-button eyes that made Lang tag him as the most dangerous of the family.

"So you're starting school," Buck sneered, "right here a whoop and a holler away from Black Wall Canyon."

"Yes, we started school," Lang answered calmly.

"We'll see how long it lasts," grated Buck. "One of these days you'll run into Dell, and there'll be a dead schoolmarm if you ain't too yella to pack a gun."

"If that's all you rode in here to say—" Lang began.

"It ain't. You tell them Adams kids they'd better not do no more trespassing."

"They came on a county road," Lang said testily. "If they went around, it'd be five, six miles, and that's too far for little kids like the Adams girls to travel in bad weather."

"It ain't a county road. It used to be, but it ain't now, and you'd better tell 'em. Come on, Ridge." Grinstead whirled his horse, and galloped out of the schoolyard, his son close behind.

Lang went back into the schoolhouse, and didn't answer the question that was in Ed Blake's eyes, nor did he until school was out, and Paul Adams was getting his brother and sisters into the buckboard.

"Maybe you'd better go around the long way, Paul," Lang said, and told the boy Buck Grinstead's orders.

Paul climbed into the seat, and took the lines. "Teacher," he said quietly, "I've got work to do when I get home. If I went around I'd

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be too late. We won't do Buck Grinstead no hurt. Git up, Loafer."

After the buckboard had gone, Ed Blake said: "Grinstead can't stop 'em, teacher. That's a county road all right. Until the drought, four years ago, there was half a dozen families up there in Coon Creek. They used the road all the time coming to school."

"But that was four years ago," Lang said thoughtfully. "You ride on home, Ed. I'll be along after I look over some papers."

As soon as Ed was out of sight, Lang left the schoolhouse and walked toward the fence that barred the narrow mouth of Black Wall Canyon. The canyon was well named. The walls were fifty feet high on both sides, straight up, and as black as obsidian. The fence was a formidable barrier, woven wire six feet high topped by four strands of barbed wire, stretched tight as a fiddle string, and anchored to thick fir posts against the canyon wall. The gate was on the north end of the fence. A well-marked dusty trail showed under the gate.

"A lot of hoofs have made that," Lang mused.

Crang! A bullet screamed by within inches of Lang's head. He looked up, eyes searching the north canyon wall. If the rifleman wanted to murder him, there wasn't much he could do to stop it. The schoolhouse was the closest cover, and it was ninety yards or more away. Then Lang saw Dell Grinstead, hunkered down on a narrow ledge twenty feet above the canyon floor.

NICE shooting," Lang called, "if you aimed to miss me. Mighty rotten otherwise."

"I aimed to miss you all right," Grinstead bellowed. "I'll get you, schoolmarm, if you stick around these parts, but you'll have a chance for your hogleg when I do."

"That's being mighty polite," Lang said ironically.

"I let you hear that whistler so you'd know it was time to back up. When you get off the road, or off the schoolyard, you're on Grinstead land. The next time you start monkeying around this fence I'll put a slug where it counts. Now git."

Lang raised a hand in grim salute. "Your pot, friend," he called easily. Turning, he strolled back to the schoolyard.

That night after supper, Lang told Sam Blake what had happened.

"You better take Dell's word," Blake said, "but I don't know how Buck figures on keeping the Adams kids off that road, though."

"Is there any way to get into the canyon except through the fence?"

Blake shook his head. "Not none. Walls straight down. Buck keeps a little herd of white faces and his horses in the canyon. I reckon there's four, five hundred acres of purty good range up there a piece after the canyon widens out."

"Do you or any of the other big outfits lose any beef?"

"Yeah, once in a while," Blake nodded. "Grinstead butchers a steer every now and then, and sells the meat in Sunup. We can't prove anything, though. Might be one of the nesters like the Adams family that gets our stuff."

"Did you ever try looking down into the canyon?" Lang asked.

Blake grinned. "I did, just last month, but I didn't see much. Buck's got a cabin, barn, a few sheds, and a couple of corrals. I saw a bunch of horses that puzzled me. About a dozen. Looked like Morgans. Mostly bays, and mighty

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nice animals. Nothing like 'em in Bunchgrass Valley. If the Grinsteads stole 'em, they didn't get 'em around here. Another funny thing is Buck and his boys don't ride 'em. Shucks, if I had a bunch like that around, I'd sure put a saddle on 'em."

"Morgans, eh?" Lang said thoughtfully. "Mostly bays. It looks funny, all right."

Buck Grinstead didn't wait long to show what he aimed to do about the road to the Adams' place. The next morning the four Adams children walked into the schoolroom half an hour late.

"This is a bad way to start the second morning of school," Lang said sternly.

Paul Adams scowled. "Grinstead put a fence across the road. I couldn't get the buckboard around it. They must've been stringing that wire all night."

Lang didn't say anything, but during the noon hour he borrowed Ed Blake's pliers and jogged back along the road until he came to the fence. He dismounted, cut the wire, hitched his horse behind the buckboard and drove back to the schoolyard.

"What'd do, you?" Paul asked when the teacher came back.

"I cut the wire," Lang grinned. "Paul, I think you'd better take the long way tonight. I don't want the Grinsteads taking a pot shot at you."

Paul cast a frightened glance toward Black Wall Canyon. "I . . . I reckon I will, teacher," he gulped.

AGAIN Buck Grinstead didn't wait long to act, and in a manner that Lang Carnay hadn't expected. After school was out, and all the children but Ed Blake had gone, a man rode into the schoolyard from the direction of Sunup. Ed was outside pitching horseshoes. When he saw the rider, he raced into the schoolhouse.

"It's Pete Makin," he panted. "Pete's the sheriff. You figure he's after you?"

Lang shoved back the book he was reading. "Wouldn't be surprising if he was," he grinned.

A moment later Makin came in. He was a stoop-shouldered man, several years on the wrong side of fifty, with a weak mouth partly covered by a washed-out, yellow mustache. He looked at Ed, then at Lang, and said hesitantly: "You Carnay, the teacher?"

Lang nodded. "I'm Carnay."

"You're under arrest for cutting Buck Grinstead's fence."

Makin had one hand on his gun butt as if he expected trouble, then his hand dropped away as Lang shrugged and got up. "Sure. I never argue with a sheriff, but you're sure gonna have trouble making that charge stick. The fence was across a county road."

"Grinstead claims it ain't," Makin muttered. "Says it ain't been used for more'n four years, so it ain't a county road no more. Whether it is or ain't is up to the judge to figure out." He came around the desk, searched Lang and found the gun in his leather-lined pocket. Makin looked at Lang questioningly, but when no explanation was forthcoming, he slipped the Colt into his waistband, and said: "Come on."

"Hit for home," Lang told Ed. "Tell your dad what's happened."

"He'll be in town before dark," Ed predicted. "He'll get you out, too, teacher."

It was a silent ride into town. Once Lang said: "Seems to me this Buck Grinstead kind of cuts a wide swath around here."

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"He's got his rights same as anybody else," Makin answered sullenly.

"What would you have done if Dell Grinstead had salivated me the day I hit town?"

"I'd arrest him same as anybody else. He didn't try to, did he?"

"He had a few symptoms of it." Lang related what had happened at the station.

Makin said wearily, "I reckon he was just bluffing. I don't know what the ruckus is about. Buck don't want the school to run, but I sure don't know why."

"It isn't the school. He wanted the school board to put up a new building on Christmas Creek. Seems like he wants to get the school away from the mouth of Black Wall Canyon. Why, sheriff?"

Makin shrugged. "I sure don't know. Long as he stays inside the law, I let him and his boys alone."

"Ever think he might be into a little small-time rustling?"

"Blake and some of the Bunchgrass Valley ranchers claim they lose some stock, but nobody wants to swear out a warrant against the Grinsteads."

LANG let it go at that. Pete Makin was the sort of a lawman who would act when he had to, and no sooner.

Ed Blake had been right. A little after nine Makin unlocked Lang's cell and handed him his gun.

"The judge says that's a county road all right," Makin said sullenly. "Maybe you want me to kow-tow around for having arrested you."

"No hard feelings, sheriff," Lang murmured. He slipped the Colt into his leather-lined hip pocket, strode past Makin, and on into the sheriff's office. Sam Blake, his son, Ed, and a couple more Bunchgrass Valley ranchers were waiting for him.

"That mule-headed sheriff!" Blake exploded. "He had no more business arresting you than a bull has eating paste. For two cents I'd—"

"Let it go," Lang grunted, and stepped out of the sheriff's office. Outside he asked: "What happened?"

"All I had to do was to see the judge," Blake said. "According to law a road can't be closed if it's been used within the last three years. Them nesters that used to live up Coon Creek quit when the drought chased 'em out, but I've used the road myself since then. So have Mike and Joe here."

"That's right," one of the ranchers nodded. "We've all gone up there for poles."

"When the judge heard that, he said there wasn't no doubt about the road still being open," Blake went on. "Of course, Grinstead can take it into court if he wants to, but it won't do him no good. Makin allowed he'd better let you out when he heard what the judge had to say."

"You boys go on home," Lang said. "I'll stick around town a spell."

"Don't get into no trouble," warned Blake. "The kids say you're a top-hand teacher, but a corpse wouldn't do much good sitting at your desk."

Lang smiled. "I'm too young to die. Thanks for getting me out." He stepped into the Silver Ball, sat in on a poker game for an hour or so, and left the saloon. Then he mounted and hit the Bunchgrass Valley road. Sam Blake would have a conniption if he knew what Lang aimed to do, but not knowing, he'd be spared the conniption. Maybe he was loco, Lang told himself, but

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the only way to find out what was behind Buck Grinstead's actions was to get into Black Wall Canyon. If he waited for Pete Makin to do something, he'd wait until Christmas came in July. Besides, what Blake had said about that bunch of Morgans interested Lang.

It was a black night, no moon, and the stars overcast by sullen clouds that had boiled up from the southwest. Now and again came the slash of lightning across the sky. Silence lay all about him, broken only by thunder and coyote howls from the hills beyond Black Wall Canyon. Lang left his horse some distance from the schoolhouse, moved across the schoolyard and on to the fence, keeping low and stepping often to listen. He reached the south end of the wire, and paused again. Dell Grinstead had fired at him from the north wall. Lang could only hope he'd be in that same position.

Lang reached the top of the fence and threw a leg over the barbed wire. A wire screeched, shrill and loud in the night silence. Immediately the shot came, a red slice into the darkness. Lead whined close to Lang's ear, too close. He dropped to the ground inside the fence, and rolled as another gun blast came, the bullet kicking up the dirt a foot from his head.

Lang continued to roll and at the same time triggered two quick slugs at the spot where the Grinstead gun had been. He moved again, angling away from the fence toward the north wall of the canyon. He stopped, listening, but there was no sound, not even the breathing of the man who sought his life.

It was a strange thing, Lang Carnay thought. Here he was, maybe twenty feet from the man who guarded the entrance to Black Wall Canyon, the man he must kill or be killed by. He couldn't see him, nor hear him, yet the man was there. The slightest sound would set his enemy's gun to blazing again.

IT was a flash of lightning that did it, setting out in brilliant relief for one second the canyon wall, and the thick-shouldered figure of Dell Grinstead. The shots beat the thunder, quick, wild shots from Grinstead's gun, slower, sure ones from Lang's. Silence again, and darkness, while booming thunder blotted out the Colt echoes. Then the thunder was gone. Lang could hear the gasping breath of a dying man. Only for a moment, and then it, too, stopped.

Lang ejected the empty shells from his gun, reloaded, and moved along the well-trodden trail. The lighted windows and door of a cabin showed ahead. Buck Grinstead stood in the doorway, long and skinny, and dressed only in his drawers.

Buck's words came clearly to Lang. "I don't like it, Ridge. Somebody's trying to get past Dell. If that blasted schoolteacher wasn't in jail, I'd bet it was him."

Ridge yawned loudly. "Shucks, pa, the teacher's in the calaboose, and nobody can get past Dell. I'm gonna climb back in bed."

"Go ahead," Buck said. "I'll put on my clothes and walk down there."

Grinstead shut the door, and Lang ran toward the house. It was play it out now to the bloody, bitter end. Lang Carnay's life, or the Grinsteads. Gun palmed, Lang jerked open the cabin door. Grinstead had his pants on, and had just finished buckling on his gun belt. Ridge was sitting up in a corner bunk.

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For one small moment they were that way, frozen figures in this grim drama of death. It was Ridge who broke the spell. His gun was in the holster, the belt hanging from a peg above his bed. Jerking it from its casing, he thumbed back the hammer—and died. Lang's first bullet smashed through the side of his head, but Ridge had given Buck his chance. The oldster plucked gun, pitched one shot, two. Lang felt the bone-smashing impact of the bullet against the ribs of his right side. With that second shot, Buck Grinstead was done, for he had one of Lang Carnay's slugs in his chest. He didn't carry it far, three teetery steps across the cabin floor. Then his legs crossed and he went down in a sprawled, motionless heap.

Lang started to holster his Colt, then thought better of it. Another man was sitting up in a bunk in the opposite end of the cabin from Ridge's. A strange-looking man, white-haired, black-browed, with a spade beard more black than white. Eyes as black as the brows stared at Lang, snaky eyes that held a glow of admiration.

"You're good with an iron, friend," he said softly. He threw back the one cover that had been over him, and put his feet on the floor. He was wearing a white flannel nightgown. "Not too fast, but mighty good. You've left me without a crew."

"Who are you?" demanded Lang.

The man laughed shortly. "You've heard of me. Name of Lud Keen."

LANG sucked in his breath. He'd heard of Lud Keen, all right, a Denver lawyer who'd made a fortune defending long riders whose luck had run out. Four years ago Keen's luck had run out, too. He'd shot a man in Denver, disappeared, and to Lang's knowledge had never been seen since.

"Yeah, I've heard of you," Lang muttered.

"A nice fat reward for taking me in," murmured Keen, "and you busted up the sweetest organization I ever heard of. You didn't know what we had here, did you? Nobody did. It was a robbers' bank. Ever hear of one, friend? No. I didn't think so. I got out of Denver with a nice chunk of dinero. Buck Grinstead was an old friend of mine. I figured he'd hide me out, but when I got over here, the drought had taken about all Buck had. He was ready to listen to reason. I figured the deal was out. We got word out to the boys that they could unload anything here. A train job, or bank, or stage maybe, might yield some jewelry or money too hot for them to handle. They made it in here, we traded them dinero that wasn't hot, for a discount, of course, and they moved on."

Keen stood up and raised a hand when Lang's gun came up. "Never mind about that iron, friend. I don't pack a Colt when I sleep. I didn't get quite done with my yarn. We'd have made out fine, but Buck got stubborn on me. Wanted to play a little side game, like rustling a few steers, and selling the meat in town. And like a fool, he took in a stolen bunch of Morgans. That's something you can't hide in a house like the stuff we'd been taking. He raised holy Ned trying to get the school moved, and the teacher from coming, and he fizzled plumb out. Yep"—he glanced at Buck Grinstead's still form—"he sure did."

"Get into some clothes," ordered Lang, "and we'll ride."

"Sure," Keen agreed. "It's your

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pot. You might as well rake it in, but you'd better take along our four years' collection before you go. I'll show you."

He walked across the cabin to a metal-bound chest and raised the lid. Lifting a box, he set it on the table. He showed the contents to Lang, more gold and silver and greenbacks than Lang had ever seen in his life.

"A train job near Pendleton," Keen said, a touch of pride in his voice, "the contents of a Wells Fargo box on a stage coming up from the Dalles, a bank in Ontario, and others too numerous to mention. Yes, sir, we had a good thing. The boys did the work, and me and Buck made the profits. Here's another one." The second box was filled with jewelry. "And let me show you what really counts."

Keen was grinning as he moved to a bureau that stood against the wall.

"Yes, sir, this one really counts. I stayed up here four years while my hair got white, waiting till folks had forgotten about me so I could make a run for the coast. I'd have made it this winter if you hadn't busted things up." He opened the top drawer. "Meybe I'll make it yet, friend. A lot of dinero here for a gent—"

Keen whirled away from the bureau, a double-barreled derringer in his hand. He fired once and a soft-nosed bullet thudded into a log behind Lang. And because Lud Keen missed that one quick shot, he died with Lang Carnay's slug in his middle.

"You . . . shoot . . . good," Keen breathed, and pitched forward on his face.

AN hour later Lang Carnay rode into Blake's ranchyard and put his horse away. There was a light in the house, and Sam Blake was standing in the doorway staring into the night as Lang came up.

"By hokey!" Blake breathed. "I'm sure glad to see you. I was thinking the Grinsteads had bushwhacked you."

"The Grinsteads won't bushwhack anybody," Lang said. He went into the house and laid the boxes of money and jewelry on the table. "I've got a bullet gash in my side, Sam. Maybe you can patch it up."

While Blake did the patching, Lang told what had happened. Then he drew a star out of his pocket and showed it to Blake. "I'm a teacher all right," he said, and grinned at Blake's blank look of astonishment. "Graduated from normal school two years ago, but I've never worked at it. I kind of like being a range detective. When I heard about the school here, and that you were having trouble getting a teacher, I thought it would be a good chance to get into the valley and kind of look things over. I was after them Morgans, but I lost track of them a little north of here. They just seemed to disappear."

"We sure did have trouble getting a teacher," Blake said glumly. "I reckon Grinstead scared the other ones we thought we had hired."

"You won't have any trouble getting a teacher now," Lang told him, and pocketed his badge. "Yes, sir, I reckon Bunchgrass Valley school won't have any more trouble. I think I'll stay on the rest of the week. I kind o' like the kids you got here."

THE END

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SOURDOUGH SAVVY

by Paul Ellsworth Triem

ALTHOUGH Dave Harnell had been in Alaska more than thirty years and had been a dog musher, a prospector and a trapper all that time, he had never seen weather anything like this. Usually as the mercury dropped, the wind dropped with it.

Tonight he knew that it was colder than fifty below, but a wind was blowing out there in the spruce and fir forest, and even here in his tight-chinked cabin air moved almost invisibly from northeast to southwest. Harnell had a fire roaring in his pot-

Dave grabbed the poker and swung at the candle, sending it flying across the room.

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bellied stove, fed by resinous wood piled against one wall—enough to last for two days—but still he had to wear three heavy shirts and, part of the time, his moosehide mittens.

"The roadhouses will be full and the trails blowed in," he told himself. At this rate, Indian Jim would not be through for another two weeks. Thinking of the Indian trapper reminded Dave Harnell of the heavy ball of amalgam he had ready to send in to Yakut, for retorting. Jim would bring back the gold and the mercury.

Harnell crossed to the table near the blanket-covered window. On it stood a miner's candle, its spire of light twisted sidewise in the grip of the wind.

The ball of amalgam, the result of Harnell's fall and winter work, stood like a mottled orange in the middle of the table. The prospector had just picked it up when he heard a sound, from the outer darkness.

ABOVE the steady moan of the wind through the trees it sounded like the whining of a demoralized sled dog. And something was scratching at the door of the storm shed that formed a dead-air space beyond the cabin-door proper. Harnell set the ball of amalgam on the table and in three strides was across the room. As he swung the inner door open a great bank of milky vapor rushed at him. In the same moment the storm door burst in, and something dark and almost shapeless fell headlong to the floor.

It was a man, wearing a parka, mukluks and mittens. His face, as much of it as showed in the gloom of the storm shed inside the rim of his parka hood, was dead white. Harnell got the door shut and half-carried, half-dragged the stranger into the cabin.

He was a big fellow, and even in that first appraising look Harnell didn't care for him. There was something rapacious in his hooked nose and jutting chin. His eyes were frozen nearly shut.

Harnell knew all the things to do. He used kerosene, sparingly. The skin would peel and likely some of the flesh would come with it, no matter what he did. But he could get the lethal frost out of the big fellow's blood and nerves. Half an hour later he had the burly body thawed out and a measure of consciousness restored. Eyes rimmed with what looked like raw beefsteak blinked up at Dave Harnell. This fellows who had come in out of the storm—without even a gun or a blanket on him—was inspecting the man who had saved him.

"Whyn't you hole up an' build a fire?" Harnell demanded. "Half an hour more an' you'd have been froze so stiff your arms would have broke off!"

"No matches," muttered the stranger. "I had 'em wrapped up in my blankets. My outfit was stole, comin' over the pass."

But the pass was to the west and Harnell believed his visitor had come from the east. He'd seen them before—camp robbers and killers, heading desperately away from the Canadian police. Once across the Klondike line they were only moderately safe for Trail Deputy Larsen, from the United States marshal's office at Yakut, was death on renegades.

"You must have had a gun," Harnell persisted. "You could have started a fire by shooting into bunch of rags—"

The big fellow tipped back in the chair into which Harnell had helped him. A film, like the nictitating membrane on a falcon's eyes, seemed

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to sweep across those bloodshot optics of his.

"Ever try it?" he sneered. "Mebbe it could have been did back in the days of black powder—though I doubt it. The blast of the gun puts out any fire that starts."

Dave Harnell nodded, for he had never fully believed this tradition. There were a lot of stunts men talked about without trying, and when they did try them they wouldn't work. Silently Dave sat about cooking a meal and when the grub was ready he hauled his slab table over beside his guest's chair.

"Pitch in," he said, and turned his attention to the fire.

It had burned dangerously low. The suction of the storm wind through the cabin burned the chunks of resin-soaked fir in a hurry.

Harnell put some wood on the fire. Then turning again toward his visitor, he tensed. The big fellow was holding Harnell's carbine across his knees. He must have stood up, tiptoed in his soft-footed mukluks to the farther wall, and lifted the wapon down.

Harnell stretched out his hand. "Give me the gun," he said. "Be careful—it's loaded!"

The muzzle had swung up till it was pointed at Dave's middle. And those bloodshot eyes were narrowed and sneering.

"Don't fret," the stranger said contemptuously. "*I* know it's loaded. What's the good of a gun that ain't? You can't kill no one with it!"

Harnell didn't reply. This was one of the renegade breed, all right, a desperate outlaw who'd shoot with as little excitement as if he were blowing his nose.

DAVE HARNELL saw those crafty killer's eyes moving in little darting forays. He saw them take in the blanket and fur-piled bunk, the shelves of sacked and tinned grub. Then, with dilating pupils, they rested on the ball of amalgam.

"Must be in bonanza gravel," the man said hoarsely. "There's enough gold in that ball to keep a man fat fer a couple of years!"

Dave didn't answer the implied question. A submerged part of his mind was busy checking the details his eyes showed him—and adding them up. A musher without weapons, tools, blankets—or matches. Claimed to have come in from the west, over the pass. The kind that felt comfortable only when holding a loaded gun. Murder in his smoldering eyes.

"Might as well put that gun back where it belongs," Harnell said when he had worked out this sum in criminal psychology. "I'm going to get you a hooker of whiskey. It'll take the rest of the chill out of your bones."

But when Dave Harnell had fetched his whiskey bottle from under his bunk and was about to pour out a judicious quantity of liquor into a glass, the man with

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the carbine nodded peremptorily toward the table.

"Put her down there," he growled. "Hooker? I'm a two-bottle man!"

For a moment after the prospector had set the whiskey bottle on the slab table the two men stared unwinkingly at each other. By this time Dave had not the slightest doubt that this man whose life he had so recently saved meant to kill him, before morning. The stranger was crafty enough to know that "renegade" was written all over him, and that his host would suspect that he had come in across the line, and was wanted by the law. Knowing or believing all this, the trail killer wouldn't take a chance on Dave Harnell's slipping out of the cabin, as soon as the cold moderated, and heading for the nearest peace officer.

If anything, the night was growing colder. Still that invisible wind moved across the cabin door, dissipating the heat of the Klondike stove. The man in the chair retained his hold on the stock of the carbine, his forefinger crooked around the trigger, his big thumb hovering near the cocking spur. But he was not yet ready for the main event of the night. He would fire if Harnell tried to jump him, but otherwise he'd wait till the whiskey fired his brain. He'd get more of a kick out of it then.

As he drank, sweat came out about his hawk's nose and over the inclined plane of his forehead. He mopped it off with his sleeve and his lips settled into a loose grin.

Dave Harnell, moving about the room, tidied up the dishes and put away a chunk of side meat. He saw the line of the amber-colored rye whiskey going steadily down.

"Fix the fire," the man with the gun growled.

LIFTING the lid, Dave looked down into the fire pot. He shrugged. "Wood burns out in a hurry," he said. "I'll hustle her up with some pitch."

He knew that those crafty eyes were following him as he walked to the shelf and lifted down a big tin can. Without meeting the other's eyes, Dave moved back to the stove, again removed the lid, and stooped.

He poured the contents of the can into the fire pot. Flames shot upward and, turning, Harnell picked up a stick. He dropped it into the stove and replaced the cover.

But all this work didn't make the room perceptibly warmer. Dave hovered about the stove, looked often into it, poked the fire. From the corners of his eyes he saw his unwelcome guest move the muzzle of the carbine till it again pointed at him.

The candle formed a winding sheet and began to gutter. Reaching over, Dave pinched off part of the charred wick. The big fellow in the chair watched. His eyes were on the prospector's face almost every moment.

The room grew so much colder that the air again turned milky white, as it had when the doors were momentarily opened. Frost patterns were forming on the cabin walls.

"You're not much of a fire tender," the big fellow growled. "Throw on some more of that pitch wood!"

As Harnell stooped to pick up the wood he saw his antagonist raise and steady the carbine. Dave pivoted to face him, just as he would have faced a wolf or a lynx that had gotten into his cabin. But the man with the carbine was primed at last for the kill. His lips were drawn tight against his yellow teeth.

Dave Harnell yelled and ducked.

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Grabbing the poker, he struck out with it.

Not at the man with the gun; instead he struck the candle and sent it flying across the room. Instantly everything was black—save for two jets of fire that came from the roaring carbine. Then there was another sound, like water striking hot coals, and the table was knocked over. A moment later a door banged against the wall.

The gun roared once more and the sound was followed by a moment of silence. The big outlaw could feel the same lethal wind that had chased him over the trail sweeping in.

"Come back an' shut that door!" he shouted in sudden panic. "I'll quit foolin' with the gun!"

There was no answer. "Mebbe I got him," he thought, and began to feel his way toward the door.

Wind struck him in his inflamed eyes and his fingers were already numb. But he closed the two doors and went muttering and fumbling back to the stove. He lifted off the lid. The fire was out.

Sobered, he felt his way to the shelves and began to lift down and explore the contents of various cans and bags. A horrible thought came over him. He had been concentrating on the job of wiping out this miner, so that he could live safely in his cabin and eventually cash in the ball of amalgam, and all this time that other fellow had had a plan. And he had carried it out.

"By Satan, it was matches an' not pitch he put in there!" the outlaw, pressed upon by the darkness, whispered hoarsely. "And just afore he lit out, he throwed in the kittle full of snow he kept fer water!"

Cans began to slip through his numb fingers. He heard them clank to the floor.

WHEN Trail Deputy Larsen reached Dave Harnell's cabin, the prospector had his prisoner ready for transportation.

"He ain't handsome, Nels," Harnell said, "but the meat ain't all fell off his bones, as I was scared it would. You see, I was just fool enough to let him get my gun an' it sure looked like I was tetotally disarmed. But he'd come in off the trail with nothing on him, not even matches. So I burned what matches I had in the cabin, poked the fire till it was most out, then dumped in my snow water for good measure an' hightailed fer out of doors.

"That ball of amalgam should have told this varmint that I was doing some drifting, down in my prospect hole, an' drifting at this time of year means keeping a fire going night an' day," continued Harnell. "But even if he had thought of it, chances are he couldn't have found me. I knew where the tunnel entrance was, an' he didn't.

"So I holed up an' was perty comfortable till morning. Then I sneaked back an' his lordship was lying on my bunk, with all the robes an' blankets piled on him. With the cold where she was that night, there wasn't enough furs in Alaska to keep a man from freezing, with no fire, so I had plenty trouble gitting him thawed out ag'in. Then when Indian Jim come I sent him to get you."

Nels Larsen's eyes were grim as he looked at the blinking, cold-burned desperado sitting with slack arms on the edge of the bunk.

"Come along," he said. "I got an 'in transit' warrant for your arrest. You know all about it—murder, over at Dawson City. You sure made a bad mistake trying to outsmart an old sourdough like Dave Harnell."

THE END.

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RANGE SAVVY

by Carl Raht

A "slow brand" was a ruse used by rustlers which worked very well unless honest cowmen caught on to it. Mutilating a brand was against the law, and all brands were recorded at the county seats. Many rustlers vented former brands, and then burned on their own, making it look as though the cattle had been legally sold to a new owner, trusting that an observer would not get to the county seat to investigate before the slow brand had been moved out of the country.

The cottonwood tree is found almost everywhere in the West. It was seldom used for firewood or for building purposes because it is neither hard nor durable. However, it served many useful needs. The Northern Indians used the bark of the cottonwood for winter horse feed when deep snow covered other forage. Horses subsisting on the young, tender bark grew fat. Around Indian encampments the trunks of these trees, bleached and smooth as bones gnawed by Indian dogs, or scraped with knives, littered the ground. The early Spanish padres planted cottonwoods along the irrigation ditches which they taught their Indian proselytes to construct. The tree was of quick growth and disease-resistant. In the autumn, when its puff balls of cottonlike fabric —hence the name—were matured, the ground underneath the spreading branches turned snowy white. After the American pioneers, and the accompanying lawless element, invaded the West, the cottonwood served a more sinister use as a hangman's tree. But it is best known as having given its name to the shrine of Texas liberty—the Alamo, which means cottonwood in Spanish.

The Mexican serape gave a splash of color to the dull desert background of the Southwestern range country and had many practical uses. As well made as a Navaho blanket, it lasted the owner many years. When worn shabby it was used for a saddle blanket. In early days the design adhered to a simple pattern, mostly of narrow strips about two feet wide of various colors sewed together. This was because the first weaving frames were only two feet wide. The effect of the wide-colored stripes was often beautiful and possessed an individuality lacking in later imitations. The serape was a coat in stormy weather, a slit being left between two strips in the center so it might be slipped over the wearer's head. In the saddle, the rider fitted it over both himself and riding gear. When the owner was caught out at night, it made a warm bedroll, turning the coldest wind. It had its use in a knife fight —when wound around the arm as a sort of shield protecting the fighter. Quite often it was used in place of the bullfighter's *capote*, when the cape was not available. When not in use, the serape was never tied to the saddle, as the cowhand's slicker was, but was worn jauntily over the owner's left shoulder as a scarf, adding bright color to the vaquero's rig.

Mr. Raht will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

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The news that Bender's younker was heir to a million dollars traveled quickly through the town.

CAYUSE COWMAN

by Hapsburg Liebe

SLIM young Kid Bender had grown up with cattle, yet he couldn't find a range job. He'd come of a wild set noted for swinging the long loop, a set that had fought cowmen and lawmen until the Kid himself was all there was left of it.

Even his gun and saddle had gone for bare necessities, and he was in castoff rags so ill-fitting that he was ludicrous in them. But nobody laughed at him—not to his face.

The one-eyed, peg-legged old ex-owlhooter who cooked for the crew of the big but unlucky QyO Ranch went clumping to the bunkhouse back door in response to the Kid's low halloo. The Kid's chief meal ticket and only real friend, Peg Jones was. In other days, when Jones had two good eyes and two good legs, he had ridden with Bender's dad. But nobody much knew that.

"Git down and come in, young un," Peg said, squinting at the high sun. "Mr. Tom might raise hell if he was to ketch me feedin' you, and I want you to git a belly load and be gone before he gits back from town."

The slim newcomer continued to sit stiffly on the bare back of his lean buckskin cow pony, something new and desperate, in his starved countenance, the blue of his eye now the blue of steel in the tempering.

"I've come to borry your six-shooter, Peg. I'll fetch it back soon as I've got one of my own. I'm drove

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to it—nothin' else I can do; I just can't beg any more."

For a moment old Jones stared into the distance. Then he spoke. "I been afeared you'd hit the holdup trail, son. Truth is, I been plumb sure you would. But it won't pay. I ought to know!"

"You gimme that there six-shooter, Peg," Bender said.

"Look," cried Jones, and jerked his gray-stubbled chin leftward.

The Kid looked. There at a corner of the bunkhouse stood Tom Greer, owner of the unlucky QyO. Off his own range, this tall, lean, thirty-year-old rancher was called a hard and difficult man, and his appearance bore it out.

"What you going to do with a six-shooter, Kid?" Greer asked.

"That's none o' your business!"

Greer shrugged. "I'm making it my business. Ride to town with me, and I'll buy you a new gun and belt and cartridges. Also I'll buy you new clothes and a new saddle, and I'll give you a range job here at fifty a month and chuck. Yeah, I mean it. You ready to go?"

The Kid blinked and gaped. Most important was the job—fifty a month and chuck—he knew top-hand riders who got only forty. He switched his eye back to old Peg, who was speaking fast:

"Mr. Tom don't never joke, young un. Take him up afore he changes his mind!"

Bender swore in surprise. "Well, it won't cost me nothin' to find out what the trick is. Where's your hoss, Tom?"

GREER'S horse stood over trailing rein on the other side of the bunhouse. Two minutes later, ranchman and ragamuffin cowboy were riding together townward.

"I savvy this, Tom," Kid Bender muttered presently. "You got some big dirty work you want done, and, me bein' who I am, you thought I'd jump at it. I ain't promisin' you I will. In fact, mebbe I won't. Want to tell me what it is?"

When Tom Greer only smiled, the Kid became more suspicious than ever. You simply did not get something for nothing. As for dirty work, that had never been in his line and wouldn't be now.

"It's funny about your place bein' unlucky, Tom. I never did hear exactly why. And that QyO brand—funny about that, too. Ain't it supposed to be Spanish?"

"Yeah. Spaniard and his wife owned the outfit before me, and their first names was Quincio and Olivia. In Spanish, *y* means *and*. Quincio *y* Olivia; QyO; see, don't you? They sold the ranch because it was unlucky, and I thought I could beat the jinx but didn't. Case of losing cows, only two or three at a time, but enough to plumb kill the profit. Never a sign as to where they go. No tracks, no anything!"

"All Herefords, I noticed." The Kid's blue eyes slitted. "Tom, how long you been in the business?"

"Only since I came down here from Montana, less than a year ago. Was in the hoss business in a big way up there. I brought my crew with me."

"Well, I'll be—" said Bender. "Hoss coyboys. Don't know cows, and you don't neither. Think you're better'n cow folks, mebbe, and likely that's why nobody's tried to help you beat what you called the jinx."

A new thought turned the Kid a fourth of the way around on the bare back of his buckskin. "Say, Tom, me bein' from a rustler breed, did you think I could find out where your cows was goin' to?"

"No, Kid," Greer said. "That had

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nothing to do with it. "You couldn't do any more about my cows vanishing than my boys and I have done."

"How about your crew? Can you trust 'em?"

"Every one," Tom Greer said.

They rode on to town.

AT a long hitch rail in front of the leading general store they drew rein, dismounted and tied. The next thing Kid Bender knew, he was surrounded by close to a dozen of the town's biggest men—and all of them wanted to shake hands with him!

"Never mind, never mind," barked Greer, breaking through to grip the Kid's arm. "Bender don't go for that sort of stuff. First thing he wants is to get dressed up, and I'm the jigger who's doing it—lay off, will you?"

He hustled the Kid out of the group and into the store, kicked the door shut and turned the key.

Ten minutes later there was no ragamuffin cowboy left. He was in good clothing from high-peaked Stetson to high-heeled boots. He had on a new blued six-shooter in a new engraved buff holster, swung to a new buff belt filled with shiny new cartridges. Then Greer bought a new saddle for him. The Kid was stunned. He couldn't even talk.

They almost had to fight their way through a crowd when they tackled the job of putting the new rig on the buckskin cow pony. But at last they did it. Then the two swung up to leather and rode a streak toward the QyO with many a disappointed eye staring after them.

"What does it mean, Tom?" Kid Bender burst out, when the town lay behind them. "None of them fellas back there would even gimme a pleasant look before. Now they all act like I was a king or something. What does it mean?"

Tom Greer had never looked quite so grim. "You satisfied with your new stuff and your new cow job?"

"Sure. But—"

"All right," Greer said. "Leave her as she lays."

The Kid swore and went on: "Tom, you don't like them folks back there in town, and they don't cotton much to you. That's because you're a hoss man and sorta uppity amongst cow folks, ain't it?"

No answer. After they had ridden a mile, Bender spoke again.

"Soon as I've had a bite to eat, Tom, I want to see your whole range, especially the edges. I got a notion I can pay you back for what you've done for me by findin' out where and how your cows vamooses. Like I told you, you and your hoss cowboys don't know cows, Tom."

"All right," Greer said, "but I hardly think you'll have any luck."

He had his boys show Bender over the entire broad range that afternoon. Somewhat to his surprise, he liked the QyO "hoss cowboys."

THE old bunkhouse cook, Peg Jones, rose before daybreak the next morning. A fire was already going in the lean-to kitchen stove. Kid Bender had done it. While the Kid ate, he muttered:

"That long hill chain on the south and west is full of gaps. A big gap in the very middle. Where does it lead to, Peg?"

"I don't know," Peg answered. "I don't ride no more, young un, y'see, me bein' one-legged and one-eyed and so danged no-account. But they is a whole big wilderness of hills beyond, I can tell you that. You think it's rustlin'?"

"Mebbe not." Bender narrowed a keen blue eye and whispered: "Peg, you got any idea why Greer done what he done for me?"

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Jones' one eye gleamed, but he shrugged. "Young un, if you can find out where them cows went, fer gosh sakes do it. Right now that means more to you than anything else on earth!"

Kid Bender was gone all that day, all the night following, and more than half the next day. He had found the answer to one of the two big questions; like most mysteries, it was a simple thing once you knew.

Tom Greer was sitting on his ranchhouse front gallery with a stockmen's journals in his hands.

"Buck up, Tom," cried the Kid, dismounting at the gallery steps. "You can get used to anything—except rocks in your shoes!"

"What's eatin' you?"

"Oh, nothin' much." Bender grinned. "I found you a new range full of fat and sassy Hereford cows all wearin' your QyO brand and as wild as deers, that's all—big grass basin hid down in them tangled southwest hills, where it seems nobody ever goes!"

His triumphant voice carried easily to the bunkhouse. Old Peg Jones came clumping, was nearing the gallery when Greer managed to get words together.

"You drunk, Kid, or crazy?"

"Remember me tellin' you that a hoss man don't know cows?" the Kid said. "Well, listen. All them southwest hill gaps is floored with sand, and the gap mouths is thick with chaparral. Beyond that hill chain is a creek that leads to the grass basin I just told you about. When wind blows in through the gaps, it brings water scent to cows, and that water is closer than your range creek. Cows is sneakin' critters, Tom. One or two at a time they've sneaked through the gaps. And the same wind which brung 'em the scent of water covered their tracks with sand. You get it now, hoss man?"

"I do!" jubilantly creaked Peg Jones. "Cattle natcherly will follow a stream, and when they finds that grass basin they sorta just settles down there amongst their kind. Mr. Tom, this Kid Bender sure has beat your jinx for you!"

Tom Greer recognized stark truth in it. He sprang up grinning.

"Fifty bucks a month and cheap at the price," Greer said. "And a couple hundred cash as a reward, to show you my heart's where it ought to be. Kid, you've got a lifetime job here. If you want it, I mean. Personally, I believe the news is a hoax, because—"

"News? What news?"

"The news that's slipping around about your set of Benders being the offshoot of a rich old California family and you standing to inherit a million dollars. Those jiggers in town took stock in it, all right, and I thought if it just happened to be true—not liking the town jiggers much—I'd see that they didn't skin you, Kid!"

The Kid swore again and laughed. His blue eyes were twinkling. "Me with a good job like I got here, and friends, what do you reckon I'd want with a million dollars? But it ain't true, is it, Peg?"

"No," Peg Jones answered quickly, "it ain't. I'll own up, young un, now that things has worked out so plumb nice. I knowed it couldn't hurt you none, and thought it might some way help. It was me snuck word about the million dollars around—I whispered it to a dozen people, and made 'em all swear they wouldn't tell."

THE END.

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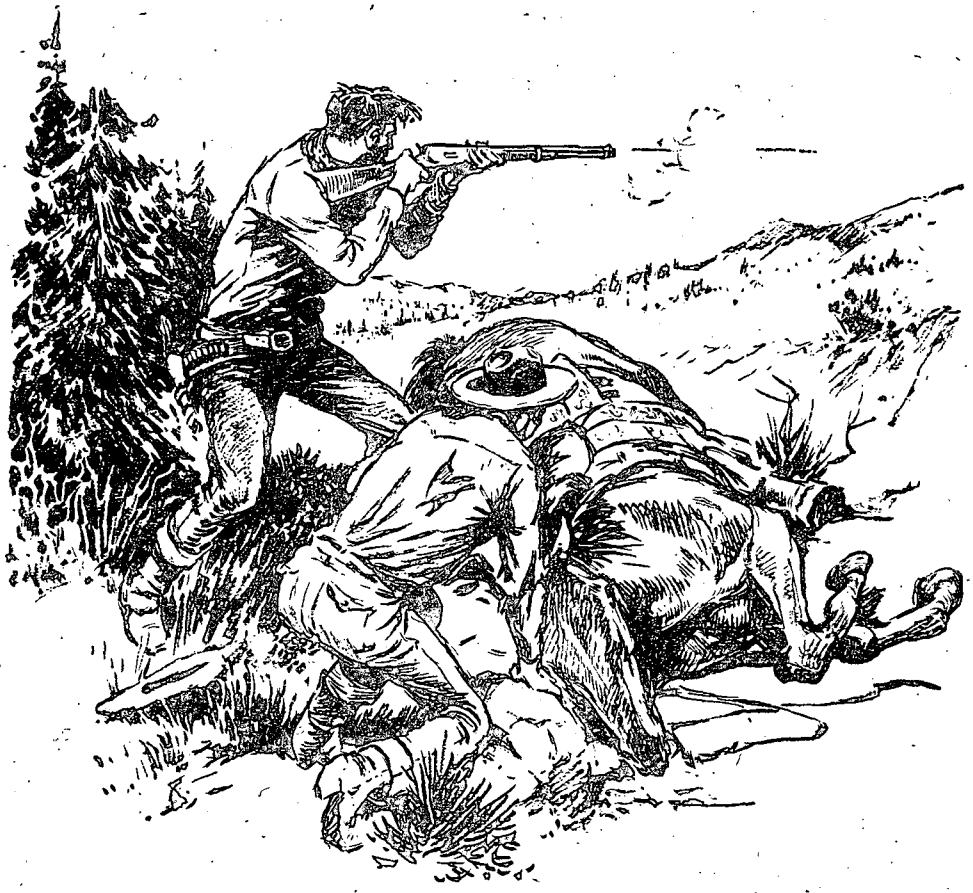
TINHORN TRAITOR

by Gunnison Steele

EARLY morning mists curled about the higher hills and poked like exploring gray tentacles into hollows and canyons. But they couldn't hide from Sheriff Tim Shane the still figure lying there in the fir thicket.

The lawman's angular face was haggard and gray as the fog itself as he looked down at the figure. The man was young, dressed in what had once been expensive clothes, with dark, handsome features. He wasn't dead, but asleep, exhausted. A six-shooter lay near an outstretched hand.

Very carefully, Tim Shane stooped and took the gun from the ground. He stuck the pistol into the waistband of his Levis and drew a deep breath, looking thoughtfully at the



Although he could see nothing to shoot at, Shane brought up his rifle and drove two quick shots into the slope.

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sleeping man. That man was Ben Kipp, the best friend Sheriff Tim Shane had in the world—and now Shane had to take him back to a hang rope.

Shane stood a moment, gun muzzle drooping. It had been a hard trail, all the more so because he'd had to guard against the death that lurked on his back trail as well as the danger ahead. He liked to think that Ben Kipp wouldn't really kill him, if it came to a showdown between them. But Apache Drue would do worse than kill him.

Apache Drue and his cutthroat riders were prowling the hills, searching for Tim Shane. Maybe they were miles away, maybe only yards, but creeping with drawn guns and eager eyes through the shrouding fog. That called for haste as well as stealth.

Stooping, Shane touched Ben Kipp's shoulder. Kipp moaned, stirred, then came suddenly awake. For a second he stared puzzledly up at Shane. Then he writhed suddenly aside, grabbing at the spot on the ground where his gun had been.

"Sorry, Ben," Shane said softly, "I took your gun. You must have got careless, goin' to sleep like that."

Red-haired Ben Kipp shrugged, sat back on his heels. "Just wore out. Well, feller, reckon you've got me."

"Looks like. You left sign when you crossed that little stream back there, and I tracked you here. I kind of hated to wake you up."

Ben Kipp's lips curled bitterly. "Like blazes you did! Just like you hated to arrest me for killin' Lafe Horn, when you knew blasted well I didn't do it; like you tracked me into the hills after I broke jail, houndin' me while I crawled and hid and starved like a wolf. Don't give me that tripe!"

"You're talkin' wild, Ben," Shane said paiently. "You know I had to do them things, because I'm the law. I'd have done it anyway, for your own sake, to keep you from the owlhoot."

"And I reckon you'll put a rope about my neck—for my own sake!"

"I hope it won't come to that. I don't think you killed Lafe Horn, and mebbe, when you go back and stand trial, we can prove it. I'll help—I'll spend every dollar I can scrape to free you. But I've got to take you back. You savvy that, don't you?"

Ben Kipp looked at the homely, rawboned sheriff and smiled twistedly. "I savvy you'd even hang yourself, if the evidence said you was guilty. You're just that lunkheaded crazy! You got anything to eat?"

"Some sandwiches, in my saddlebag. My bronc's in a canyon down below a piece. I'll put my gun up, if you promise you won't try to get away."

"No, dammit!" said Kipp. "You're the law, and I'm your prisoner. Give me a chance and I'm liable to bash your head in and line out!"

Tim Shane grunted angrily. "All right, if you want it that way. Head out!"

THEY threaded their way through the dripping fir thicket. Shane kept the gun muzzle close to his prisoner's back, eyes and ears alert. Kipp was limping slightly. Shane had found the fugitive's horse the day before with a broken leg and a bullet in its brain at the bottom of a ravine. Kipp had got the bad leg, Shane figured, when his horse stumbled and fell.

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They crossed a shallow stream, paused to drink, then climbed the rise beyond. Just then a twig snapped, and Shane whirled like a startled cat, eyes boring into the underbrush.

Kipp stared curiously at him. "What'n blazes is wrong with you? Scared of a rabbit?"

Sheriff Shane looked with relief at the long-eared rabbit that hopped into view. Then he said: "You might as well know, Ben. Mebbe we'll get out of the hills, mebbe not. Apache Drue and his gunnies are after me."

"Apache Drue! What's he trail-in' you for?"

"You ought to know that. Drue hates me, partly because I've blocked several of his crooked deals, but mainly because I had to kill his brother, Thorpe Drue, soon after I was elected sheriff. Apache swore he'd get me for that, and he's been waiting his chance ever since. Looks like this is it."

"How does he know you're in the hills?"

"Because I wouldn't let a posse ride after you. One of Drue's men was in town when I rode out, alone. I spotted Drue yesterday, with five others, on my back trail. He aims to put me away, off here in the Bear Paws, where nobody'll know. Nothin's too snake-mean for Apache Drue to do, you know that. I just wanted you to know how the cards lay."

"Why?" There was bitter mockery in Ben Kipp's grin. "Yeah, I know how Apache Drue hates your eyeballs. And it won't be any skin off my head if he gets you. That way, maybe I'd go free!"

"Start walkin'!" Shane said angrily. "Apache Drue ain't got me yet, and he'll think he's been scorched with the fires of Hades before he does!"

They went on, and twenty minutes later came to where Shane's big buckskin was tied in a boulder-clogged ravine. Ben Kipp wolfed down the two sandwiches Shane gave him. Then they both mounted the buckskin, and started down through the fog-shrouded hills. It was thirty miles back to Lee's Ferry.

Sheriff Tim Shane rode with rifle in hand. The gun wasn't for Ben Kipp, but for the cold-eyed killers that might pop out of the brush at any minute. Shane felt heavy inside as he thought of the events leading up to this.

This was Tim Shane's second term as sheriff. Before that, he and Ben Kipp had been saddlemates,

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working, playing, fighting together. Even then, Ben had liked to dress fancy, to drink and play poker and try to grab off rodeo prizes. It had continued after Shane was elected sheriff, and Ben Kipp started a little cow outfit. The flashy-dressing Kipp, folks said, put in more time playing poker than raising cows.

IT had jolted Shane pretty hard when old Lafe Horn had been killed in his cabin one night, and evidence pointed to Ben Kipp as the killer. Shane had arrested his friend and put him in jail. At the trial Kipp admitted that he'd spent part of the night when Horn was killed at the murdered man's cabin playing poker. He admitted that he was pretty drunk, that the poker game had broken up in a quarrel. But he denied having killed Horn.

To seal Kipp's doom, two Circle H punchers swore that the night of the killing they'd happened to pass Horn's cabin; that they'd heard a racket inside, had looked through a window and seen Ben Kipp and Lafe Horn fighting. They'd ridden on, they testified, considering it none of their business.

Ben Kipp had been found guilty and given a life sentence at Deer Lodge.

But three days ago Kipp had broken jail and escaped into the hills, on a stolen horse and without food. Refusing to take a posse, Shane had ridden out, alone, to bring him back. Now, his heart like a hunk of lead inside him, he was headed out.

"Look, Tim," Kipp said as they rode along. "Them two waddies, Sloan and Riker—they lied. I didn't fight with Lafe Horn. I left his place about midnight, and went straight home. I left him almighty drunk, but alive. Somebody paid them punchers to lie."

"Figure so," Shane agreed. "After the trial they flashed big rolls, then in a few days they pulled out. Nobody's seen them since. I've figured all along somebody framed that killin' onto you, kid. Know anybody that hates you that bad?"

Ben Kipp grinned wryly. "I've stepped on a good many toes, I guess, but nobody that matters—unless it's Apache Drue. Drue hates me because I sided you in the trouble that come up after you killed Apache's brother, Thorpe. I wonder—"

Apache Drue had a cow outfit over at the foot of Wolf Peak. Drue, it was rumored, had been other things before he was a rancher. Suave, educated, soft-spoken, Apache Drue was, nevertheless, a deadly, ruthless figure whom most men avoided. By sly trickery, or by merciless cruelty, he got what he wanted.

Soon after becoming sheriff, Tim Shane had incurred Apache Drue's fierce hatred. Thorpe Drue, a wild, black-tempered youth, had run wild in town one night. He'd tried to stick up a saloon, and had defied the new sheriff to stop him. Faced with the choice of killing or being killed, Tim Shane had shot Thorpe.

The next day, Apache Drue had come unarmed into the sheriff's office. He'd looked at Shane, burning hate in his black eyes, and said: "Some day, Shane, I'll settle this account. Remember that, when you try to sleep at night. You'll pay a thousand times over!"

A RIFLE roared, and a bullet snarled like an angry hornet past Shane's ears. He whirled, gun rising—and was just in time to see a burly, hawk-faced hombre duck back into the underbrush a hundred yards away.

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Shane dug his heels into the tired buckskin's flanks, and they gained the shelter of an arroyo. The burly man, he knew, was one of Apache Drue's gunhands. Momentarily, he and Kipp were safe; but their chance of final escape was indeed slim. The buckskin, carrying its double load, was already weary.

The mist was thinning, and the sun shone through. That was bad. Soon Drue's pack would be closing in.

"Kind of a joke on you, ain't it?" Ben Kipp said. "You got me, but looks like you won't take me back. See the joke?"

Shane said nothing. The buckskin had slowed to a crow-hoppy gallop. They crossed a stream and made their way along the floor of a steep-walled little valley.

High up on a tree-studded slope, a loose rock made a load noise as it tumbled downward. An instant later, a rifle blasted again, and Ben Kipp ducked away as the bullet plucked at his hat brim. They dodged into a dense cedar thicket.

"I'll have to make a stand," Shane said calmly. "Catfish Joe's old trading post is no more'n a couple of miles ahead. Mebbe we can make it to there."

Catfish Joe's place was an old, two-story building that was made of strong logs. If they could reach the old post they would have a fighting chance. But, a moment later, Shane knew that they couldn't make it to Catfish Joe's.

The buckskin stumbled suddenly, went down, and Shane hit the ground with the sound of gunfire in his ears. He staggered to his feet and saw smoke curling out from a thicket high on the slope. Bringing up his rifle, he drove two quick bullets into the slope, although he could see nothing to shoot at.

Then he ducked back into the cedars, pulling Kipp with him. The buckskin was kicking its last, back there on the ground. The two men crept through the underbrush, eyes searching for a spot where they could hole up—and found it. It was a natural fortress, with their backs to an overhanging wall and hemmed in on three sides by granite boulders.

They slid down to the ground, and Shane reloaded the rifle. He could hear sounds that told him Drue's gunmen were closing in, stealthily seeking vantage points where they could pour a hail of lead in among the boulders. His back turned to Ben Kipp, Shane stared bitter-eyed along the rough slopes. This couldn't change the outcome, only postpone it.

A noise behind him made him twist aside quickly. But Ben Kipp had leaped in close, and his looping fist caught Shane on the chin, smashing him back against the wall and jarring the rifle from his hands. Rage surged through the lawman. Through a swirling mist he saw Kipp charging in again.

SHANE flung his arms about Kipp's wiry body, and they went down. The sheriff's hammering fist slammed against flesh and bone. They rolled over and over, fighting fiercely.

Then, suddenly, Ben Kipp had Shane's six-gun. He was on his feet, grinning, and the gun was pointed at the sheriff.

"I told you I'd bash in your head if you give me a chance!" Kipp snarled. "I ought to do it, right now. But mebbe Apache Drue'll do a better job."

Tim Shane said nothing, just looked at the redhead, bitter contempt in his eyes and a leaden feeling of disappointment inside him.

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It was hard for him to realize that Ben Kipp would do a thing like this. He watched as Kipp stepped forward and took his own gun from Shane's waistband.

Then Kipp yelled: "Drue! I want to talk to you!"

After a pause, a voice from above called: "What do you have to talk about?"

"I'm Ben Kipp, and I've got a gun lined on Tim Shane. Come on down, if you want him!"

"Step out where I can see you, both of you!" the voice said.

Kipp gestured with the gun muzzle, and they both stepped from among the boulders into a clear space. If Shane had been less dazed, he would have seen how crazy this was, would have taken his chances with Ben Kipp. But now he stood still, aware that stealthy sounds were moving in toward them.

Then a gaunt man with hawkish features that were cold and dark and cruel, stepped into the clearing. About Apache Drue there was the look of a sleek, powerful cat. He stood a moment, looking at the two, while five other hard-faced men stepped one by one into the clearing. All had guns in their hands.

"What's happened here?" Drue asked abruptly.

"That ought to be plain," answered Kipp. "This John Law was takin' me back to a hang noose, but I changed his mind. I just jumped him and took his gun, as you can see."

"It *is* Ben Kipp," said one of Drue's riders. "The gent that beefed old Lafe Horn. Remember, Apache?"

"I remember," Drue said. "What was your idea for doing this, Kipp?"

Ben shrugged. "Why, I dunno, exactly," he said slowly. "I saw my chance and took it. I knew you was after this badge toter. For three days and nights he's hounded me, and I hate his innards. I figured you'd treat me right. I figured you'd appreciate me takin' him—"

"I'd have got him, anyway," Drue cut in brusquely. "But maybe I *will* treat you right. Maybe I can find a place for you. If you continue to show sense."

Tim Shane still felt groggy from his short, fierce fight with Kipp. Feeling the bore of Apache Drue's hate-filled eyes upon him, he faced the man squarely.

"You take this pot, Drue," he said. "But mebbe I'll take the next."

"There won't be another one, Shane," said Drue. "I said I'd settle Thorpe's account, and now I'll do it."

"What you figure to do with me?"

"You'll find out, soon enough. Boys, catch up the horses!"

Drue's men went back into the thickets. Apache simply stood there, looking at Shane. Ben Kipp seemed ill at ease.

Bitterly, Shane berated himself for his carelessness. Now he saw that he should have expected trickery from a fancy-dressing dude who was more of a tinhorn gambler than a cowman. Still, the hurt was there inside him at finding that Ben Kipp was the kind of hombre who would turn against him to side such skunks as Apache Drue and his cutthroats.

Drue's riders brought in the horses. At a curt order from their leader they mounted and rode down through the hills, two of the horses carrying double. Shane's arms were tied, his ankles lashed under the horse's belly.

They didn't taunt him, or mistreat him. But Apache Drue's silence was more venomous than blows would have been. Ben Kipp rode a little

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apart from the others. Plainly, they were suspicious of him, despite his obvious hatred for Tim Shane.

APACHE DRUE rode straight to Catfish Joe's trading post. The gaunt old building had a ghostly look in the thinning fog. Catfish Joe, a fat, shrewd man who for years had sold supplies and rotgut whiskey at murderous prices to anyone who came his way, had been dead for years. But his place still stood here on the river bank, abandoned, infested by huge rats and owls and other vermin.

Drue and his men turned their horses into a rotting-pole corral. Then they went into the old post building, prodding the sheriff before them. Dust lay thick over the dilapidated bar and the crumbling shelves and chairs, and their footsteps sounded hollow and weird.

Drue's riders had had a plentiful supply of whiskey in their saddlebags. Soon they were half drunk, becoming loud-mouthed and abusive. Ben Kipp seized a bottle and upended it, drinking deeply.

Apache Drue wasn't drinking. His dark face was cold, without expression; but in his black eyes cold fires burned and writhed. He didn't need whiskey to kindle the flames of hate and cruelty inside him.

"What you aimin' to do with this John Law, Apache?" one of the men asked.

Drue's words were deliberate, but fell with a terrific impact: "Burn him!"

There was a short, tense silence. Tim Shane felt cold dread lift inside him. He looked at Ben Kipp. Kipp stood with whiskey bottle poised. Then the redhead laughed, a hard, sneering sound.

"Cold and hard, wasn't you?" Kipp said to Shane. "You could arrest a gent who'd gone through Hades for you, slam him into a filthy jail cell, aimin' to put a rope over his head. Mebbe fire'll take some of the ice from your veins!"

Quick, unreasoning rage hammered at Shane. He cursed Ben Kipp—low, savage words freighted with contempt—wishing fiercely that his hands were free.

Apache Drue stepped forward. Deliberately, but with incredible violence, he drove his fist into Shane's face. The treacherous blow smashed Shane backward against the rotting bar and to the floor.

"That will teach you to keep a civil tongue in your head," Drue said, almost gently. "It's unfortunate that you won't live long enough to profit by the lesson."

He gave curt orders to his men.

Shane swayed to his knees, the shadowy room reeling before his eyes. He watched as one of the men grasped an iron ring in the floor and lifted a trapdoor. A rank, damp odor came up out of the dark hole that was revealed. Below, Shane knew, was a cellar that Catfish Joe had used as a storage room for his supplies and whiskey.

Apache Drue stood over Shane, a half smile twitching his thin lips for

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the first time. "There's your grave, Shane. But you'll roast a while before you die, and you'll have ample time to regret the error you made in killing my brother. The fire will be set in an upstairs room, so that you will be able to hear the flames, and perhaps feel them, as they creep closer and the roof finally caves in!"

A QUICK hush came to the room. Drue's riders were hard, lawless men, but the stark cruelty of their leader's plan sobered them momentarily.

"You mean, you aim to burn 'im alive?"

"What did you think?" Drue asked sardonically. "And let's get on with it. I've waited a long time for this, and I don't want anything to stop it." He said to Tim Shane: "Will you climb down that ladder into the cellar, or shall I have my men gun-whip you and toss you down?"

Shane leaped suddenly at the outlaw, lashing out savagely at Drue's stomach with his boot heels. Drue leaped agilely aside, avoiding the driving boots, and laughed.

The other five closed in on Shane. He fought them fiercely, silently, seeing that Ben Kipp stood aloof, till a gun barrel slammed down against his head. The room seemed to explode in a whirling pinwheel of zooming lights.

He didn't entirely lose consciousness. He felt rough hands lift him, drag him to the trapdoor and drop him down into the evil-smelling hole. He jarred against the damp ground, and lay there on his back, weak, sick, his head aching. A sense of utter despair was inside him; he knew that Apache Drue wasn't bluffing. Drue would carry out his grisly threat.

Dimly, Shane was aware of sounds above. Boot thuds, the ribald shouts of Drue's men. And then, after what seemed like a long time, there was another sound—a hissing, crackling sound.

Quick realization hammered at Shane. Fire!

Shane got groggily to his feet. The cellar was black, with a dim crack of light showing about the trapdoor above. He climbed the rickety ladder, placed his shoulders against the door and heaved. The door didn't budge; apparently Drue had weighted the trapdoor with something heavy.

Tim Shane huddled there on the ladder, sweat streaming over his face, fighting a moment of panic. The fire, he judged, was above and to one side—in an upstairs room. Quickly, the flames would sweep the upper room and roof and eat through the ceiling. Within a few minutes the flimsy old building would be a raging inferno!

The hissing, crackling sound became louder, and now Shane could smell smoke. He dropped back to the foul-smelling earth and huddled there, trying to think. He tried not to blame Ben Kipp for this. He would have died up there among the boulders, anyway. But that way, he would at least have had a fighting chance.

Here he had none. He could only crouch there in the darkness, like a trapped rat, waiting for the blazing inferno above to cave in upon him and end his misery. So Ben Kipp *had* brought him to this. To save his own neck, Kipp had doomed his former saddlemate to a horrible death.

Tonelessly, Shane cursed Apache Drue, and Ben Kipp.

Then, suddenly, he quieted. There was a scraping noise above, as the

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weight was pushed from over the trapdoor. Then the door was lifted, and Apache Drue's head and shoulders showed in the dim light. Drue had a gun in his hand.

The killer couldn't keep the vicious triumph from his icy voice: "Not a pleasant way to die, is it, Shane? You've still got plenty of time to think about it. The flames are beginning to come through the ceiling, as you can see."

It was true. Smoke was boiling down into the room above. And above Apache Drue, like a hellish halo curling about his black head, a red arm of flame reached downward. In the shadows, Shane's fingers wrapped about what he knew was half a brick.

"Even after the roof caves in, you won't die for a while," Drue taunted. "You'll die slowly, with smoke and flame in your nostrils and—"

Drue's mocking words ended in a startled squawk. Through the opening above, Shane saw a sudden swirl of movement. A figure lunged forward, kicked out at Drue, driving him headlong down into the cellar.

A voice yelled: "Get 'im, Tim—get his gun! And the rest of you skunks had better freeze, or you'll go on a lead diet!"

AS Apache Drue hit the ground, Shane was on top of him. Drue rolled away, making a hissing, spiting sound in the darkness, and gun flame churned the shadows. But Shane was after him, and the hand holding the brick swiped downward.

Drue grunted, fell back to the ground. Shane felt for the gun, took it from Drue's twitching fingers. Then he whirled, leaped to the ladder and up through the trapdoor.

Ben Kipp had a gun in each hand. Drue's five riders stood with upraised hands, blank, dazed looks on their hard faces. Their guns lay on the floor.

"You all right, Tim?" Kipp asked.

Fierce joy was rioting through Tim Shane. Not because he had miraculously been snatched from the jaws of death, but because he realized that, homehow, he'd been wrong about Ben Kipp.

"I'm fine." He grinned. "But I don't savvy just what this is all about."

"You mean, about me jumpin' you out there awhile back?" Kipp looked surprised. "I figured sure you'd sabe that. I knew if you made a fight of it, they'd kill us both. So I jumped you and took your gun, pretending to string along with them, waitin' for a chance to rescue you. I had to make it look plenty real. Just now, when Apache Drue had his head stuck down in that hole, I saw my chance. And now you can go back down and drag that snake up, before the roof caves in and cooks the whole bunch of us!"

Tim Shane looked calculatingly at the five gunmen, and a tight grin curled his lips. "I've got a better idea. We'll just send these hombres down to keep Drue company!"

The faces of the gunmen blanched, and one of them said hoarsely: "I . . . you wouldn't do that, Shane! We didn't mean to burn you. It was just a little joke to scare you!"

"This isn't a joke," Shane said flatly. "Get yourseves down into that cellar, or I'll blast you all apart! If you're not through that hole in thirty seconds, I'll pour lead into you!"

Changing patterns of fear played over the faces of the men. They looked at the lawman, at one an-

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other—and moved quickly toward the trapdoor.

APACHE DRUE had regained consciousness. He was climbing the ladder, a snarl on his bloody face, but the rush of his gun riders carried him back into the cellar. His coldly savage voice, cursing his hirelings, came up from the cellar.

Ben Kipp said puzzledly: "Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, Tim, you can't mean to—"

Shane said, "Wait!" and looked quickly about. Smoke was thick in the room, and greedy tongues of flames were licking downward through the ceiling. The whole upper story was a mass of leaping flames. It was hot in the room.

Shane took a stubby pencil from his pocket and hastily scribbled a few lines on a piece of paper. Then he went to the trapdoor.

"I'm givin' you a chance to keep from burnin', Drue—just one," he called. "I think you killed old Lafe Horn, or had it done, and framed it on Ben Kipp. I've got a confession written out here on a piece of paper. If you sign it, you'll likely hang, if you don't sign it, you'll burn. You've got just about two minutes to make your choice!"

"I won't sign anything," Apache Drue said savagely. "You're bluffing, Shane—you won't go through with this!"

"Won't I? It's gettin' hot up here. In a little while we'll have to leave. But before we go we'll shove this heavy bar back over the trapdoor."

"You think I'm fool enough to put a rope about my neck?" snapped Drue.

"Suit yourself," Shane said calmly. "Can you gents feel this heat down there? In a little while you will, but then it'll be too late. You'll curl up like a burnt leaf—"

"I don't want to burn!" a voice yelled hoarsely. "You sign that paper, Apache, or I'll—"

"Shut up, you yellow dog!" Drue said furiously.

"I won't shut up! You know blasted well you hired me and Modoc to kill Lafe Horn and rob his safe. You paid them two saddle tramps to swear they looked through a window and saw Ben Kipp and Horn fightin'. You sign that paper and get us out o' here, or I will!"

Apache Drue cursed the panic-stricken gunman savagely. "He's bluffing, I tell you. He won't let us burn!"

Shane slammed the trapdoor, driving a gust of heat-laden air downward into the upturned faces. His and Kipp's boots thudded against the floor. Five seconds seemed age-long.

Then Apache Drue's voice, for the first time ragged with fear and panic, lifted shrilly: "Wait, Shane! I—Don't leave me here. I had Lafe Horn killed. I'll sign your paper—anything—only get me out of here!"

Shielding his face against the almost unbearable heat, Tim Shane ran back and lifted the trapdoor. He shoved pencil and paper down into the cellar, watched through fogging smoke as Apache Drue scribbled his name with trembling fingers.

Shane took the paper, turned, saw that Ben Kipp was standing close beside him. Ben's grin was wide and friendly as he reached for Tim Shane's hand. They stood like that and watched as Apache Drue, no longer icy cold and arrogant, scampered hurriedly up out of his self-chosen dungeon of doom.

THE END

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GOLD BLINDED

by

Cliff Walters

Mulqueen had to keep up his stealthy watch for more than two hours.

WRATH glinted in the eyes of stocky Wedge Mulqueen and his squat, brawny-shouldered nephew as they moved toward their sheep wagon. More specifically, they moved toward the herder who, cooking supper, had left the wagon to get an armload of pine wood he was now picking up.

The herder, a tall, rawboned young man, looked around from his task and said: "Howdy. I thought it was about time you was gettin' up the mountain with some grub."

"Grub!" Wedge rumbled. "That's all you think about, you blasted would-be sheepherder. I smell fresh mutton cookin' in the wagon there!"

"Well, I was tired of that half-spoiled sowbelly you fetched up last time—even 'fore I run out of it," replied Jim Sanbrook who was a drifting prospector by choice, but a cowpuncher, sheepherder or bartender when he needed a grubstake. He grinned and added: "If I was you, I'd fire myself as a camp tender. I'm outa bakin' powder, lard—"

"So you butcher my fat lambs. And when they're the best price in five years. Prob'ly waste half the meat!" Fury clutched Wedge Mulqueen, and he leaped at Sanbrook as he knelt on the ground. Wedge knocked him, wood and all, sprawling with a vicious blow to the side of the head.

"Why, you nickel-pinchin' scum!" Jim Sanbrook leaped to his feet, but a trifle too late. Wedge Mulqueen's burly nephew, Tobe Buell, launched his hundred and eighty pounds at the surprised herder who, rocked by a heavy blow at the base of his ear, staggered toward Mulqueen, instead of making the leap he had intended.

Mulqueen slammed another blow to the dazed man's face, and Buell hit him from the side again. There

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was a moment when four fists hammered at Jim Sanbrook. He went down in a heap from a right uppercut thrown by the irate sheepman.

Mulqueen and his nephew were still standing there side by side when Jim Sanbrook, face bruised and bleeding, propped himself up to a sitting position.

"Saddle your old black digger and get out!" Mulqueen ordered. "That sixteen dollars wages you got comin' will go for *helpin'* to pay for lambs you've butchered, you meat-greedy coyote. Get out!"

Still a little dazed, Jim Sanbrook came to his feet and said: "I thought, when I seen the jailbird there"—he nodded at Buell whose heavy brows were about an inch below the line of his shaggy, unkempt hair—"that he was goin' to take my place. But I'm not leavin' these mountains, Mr. Mulqueen. I've found something up here worth a damn sight more than your fat lambs. And if I collect that sixteen dollars, one way or another, it won't be because I need the money."

"Get out, you fourflushin' tramp!" Mulqueen rumbled.

"And you'll pay for that lamb you and Buell are goin' to eat—after I'm gone," Jim Sanbrook said through lips that were swelling. "That come from across the canyon there. From Andy Lane's camp. He gave me a chunk of lamb when he butchered this morning."

Mulqueen hooted. "Any time that crooked-nosed little weasel gives anything to *my* camp—"

"He gave it to *me*," Sanbrook answered. "And he wouldn't be crooked-nosed if you hadn't jumped on him like the boar ape you are and—"

"I guess Sanbrook wants some more fist medicine, Wedge," interrupted Buell, and took a menacing step toward the beaten man. But, when his uncle didn't follow him as he expected, Buell stopped.

"You wouldn't try it alone, either one of you—as big as you are—would you?" Jim Sanbrook said, his angry blue eyes smoldering in a battered face. He turned, moved toward his hobbled black pony grazing down by the spring.

The ex-herder had saddled that pony, had gathered up and tied on the saddle the few extra clothes that Mulqueen had thrown out of the wagon, when Mulqueen bawled: "Now go on over to Lane's range, tell him your hard-luck story and maybe he'll give you some supper!"

BUT when Jim Sanbrook rode away into the mountain dusk, he didn't head for the range of Andy Lane.

Tobe Buell, watching from the sheep-wagon door, said: "Wonder where he's headin'? And what did he mean by sayin' he found somethin' on this mountain worth more'n your—"

"Take them biscuits outa the oven!" Wedge Mulqueen ordered. "Can't you smell 'em burnin'? If you're goin' to work for me, wake up and—" Mulqueen stopped talking abruptly. Beside the water bucket he noticed two or three pieces of rock that glinted in certain spots under the illumination of the lantern hanging from the canvas arch above his head.

He picked up one of those pieces, studied it for a moment. Then, big hands tensing, he blurted: "Go saddle my horse, Tobe! While you watch the sheep, I'm goin' to trail Sanbrook. Why, that tramp prospector— Look! You've seen gold before, haven't you?"

"G-gold?" Tobe echoed.

"Yes, gold! Look at that rock.

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And it's been fresh broke from! Go saddle that horse, you gawkin' fool!"

Wolfing down a few bites of food, Wedge Mulqueen was soon astride his horse and following the trail of Jim Sanbrook which led toward the higher, rougher country. The mountain night was moonlit, cool; yet Wedge Mulqueen mopped beads of moisture from his brow occasionally. He was no mining expert, but he didn't have to be to observe the particles of gold with which this piece of ore in his pocket was studded.

Sanbrook hadn't been just bluffing about finding something valuable. That was evident enough now. Somewhere on this range he had stumbled onto something. Funny about that, Mulqueen thought. During all the time he had prospected, Sanbrook hadn't found anything worth while. Now, herding sheep, he had made a strike. Mulqueen wished now that he had held his temper. If he'd done that, played his cards right, maybe Sanbrook would have taken him into his confidnece.

Well, it was too late for friendship now. But it wasn't too late to reap the reward if—

Mulqueen stopped his horse in the shadow of a pine clump and watched Jim Sanbrook, some little distance ahead, ride over the ridge near Granite Creek and start descending toward that boulder-strewn stream. Mulqueen forged ahead, stopped near another clump of pines on that ridge and, dismounting now, peered down upon the sharp-nosed, rocky V which marked the junction of Granite and Horseshoe creeks.

Sanbrook, working in a spot of moonlight shafting through a notch in the big ridge beyond, was piling boulders around the base of a pine post he had set up. Mulqueen watched and trembled a little. This was the place! Sanbrook was posting his notice of a mining-claim location, right at the base of that rocky V which—

Hearing the hoofs of a horse, Mulqueen whirled, glared, then scurried back away from the ridge crest. A moment later he was hissing: "Why in Tophet you taggin' me up here, and on that pinto horse that can be seen for a mile on a night like this, Tobe? Didn't I tell you to stay with the sheep?"

"Aw, they're bedded down. I . . . I just couldn't stay back there. I got to thinkin' about that gold and—"

"All right!" his uncle snapped. "Now that you're here, and now that I *know* where Sanbrook's find is, I'll send you back to town and let you record a certain minin' claim—at the junction of Granite and Horseshoe cricks. Horseshoes for luck, eh, Tobe?" Mulqueen was reaching for the only paper he had, his check book.

"You better keep an eye on Sanbrook," Tobe said. "Don't let him get to town 'fore I do."

"It's a cinch he ain't been to town *lately*," Mulqueen answered. "And, if you ride like I'm tellin' you to, he won't be there in time. He might *never* get to town."

"I savvy." Tobe grinned.

AFTER his nephew had gone, Wedge Mulqueen went back to the crest of the ridge. He couldn't see Jim Sanbrook down there now, but he could see Sanbrook's pony cropping at the grass along the creek bank down there. Then a match flared in the shadow of a pine near the rocky V, and Mulqueen said to himself: "Settin' down there smokin' a cigarette for his supper! Settin'

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there dreamin' about all the wealth he's goin' to have."

It was nearly two hours before the watcher saw Sanbrook leave and ride up Horseshoe Creek. But during that time Tobe Buell must have ridden far toward town, with a downhill shot at it all the way. Mulqueen guessed he had better get back to his sheep. First, however, he would go down and change that location notice at the base of the V.

The moon had reached its midnight zenith when Wedge Mulqueen hobbled his weary horse and climbed to the sheep-wagon door. He struck a match, then stopped dead in his tracks as he saw in its flare a man standing before him. A man with a skinned-up face—Jim Sanbrook.

"Where's them rock samples you forgot to give me when you kicked me out?" Sanbrook's voice was sharp, hard.

"Why, I didn't see no—"

"You're lyin', Mulqueen. You'll wish you hadn't."

Mulqueen rushed, but this time he didn't surprise the taller man. Sanbrook's right fist lanced out, smashed hard to Mulqueen's face. That blow rocked him a little, but another one—this one to his nose—rocked him harder and sent him falling backward through the door. Yet, he had hardly bumped against the wagon tongue when Jim Sanbrook leaped after him.

Then as Mulqueen, nose bleeding, came to his feet, Jim Sanbrook waded in with rights and lefts, the same brutal blows he had taken earlier tonight. And Mulqueen, husky and desperate and crazy-mad as he was, couldn't absorb that punishment. He took another smashing left to the nose, a right uppercut that staggered him, sent him reeling across the wagon tongue again.

"What's the matter?" Sanbrook asked, waiting for the fallen man to rise. "Can't you take your own medicine as well as you can give it? Where's them ore samples?"

Mulqueen rolled over on his side, thrust a trembling hand in his pocket and brought out the pieces of precious rock.

Sanbrook picked them up, saying: "Your jailbird nephew didn't herd sheep for you very long. I thought I'd seen that boar ape headin' down the mountain on his pinto horse. I still owe him something, too. Fork over my sixteen dollars wages. Better make it twenty, pay me for that fresh meat you had for supper."

Again Mulqueen reached in his pocket and this time brought out a twenty-dollar bill. He wished he had a gun in that pocket. He would kill Jim Sanbrook now. There was an old rifle in the wagon, but he couldn't get to that now.

Mulqueen got up, stumbled down to the spring and tried with cold water to stem the flow of blood from his nose. Jim Sanbrook started walking through the sage to reach the nearest timber where he had tied his black mount.

Suddenly Mulqueen ran to the wagon, found the rifle and whipped it up to his shoulder. But the hammer clicked on emptiness. Jim Sanbrook, hearing it, turned and called: "I *told* you to fetch up some shells for that coyote gun. But they cost money, too. The same as grub!" He turned, went on.

Mulqueen slammed the empty rifle to the ground and headed for the spring again. He had tipped his hand by this gun gesture, revealed the fact that he would kill Sanbrook if he could. Well, Tobe Buell had orders to bring a couple of six-shooters up from the ranch down in the foothills.

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Sanbrook thought he had plenty of time to record his mining claim. But, before he did, thought Wedge Mulqueen, Sanbrook could be killed and his claim jumped. Of course, he would be wary when he discovered that the location notice had been changed. If this proposed murder should be discovered, Tobe would be a loyal witness for his uncle. He would swear that Sanbrook, the tramp prospector, had stolen grub from the camp of Andy Lane, the sheepman whose range lay across the canyon. Lane had trailed Sanbrook—

FIDGETING, restless, nursing a very painful nose, Wedge Mulqueen spent most of the following day herding sheep and watching the trail leading down toward the foothills. It was two o'clock in the afternoon when he sighted his nephew coming up that trail, riding a bay horse now.

Impatiently Mulqueen spurred to meet Tobe Buell—who had brought two six-shooters, all right, but who said: "I don't know that we'll dare use these guns on Sanbrook now, Wedge."

"Why?" snapped his uncle. "Stop gawkin' at my nose and tell me why."

"Well," replied Buell, "Sanbrook's already recorded his claim."

Wedge Mulqueen gripped his saddlehorn. "How? When? Did he dare leave this sheep camp and go to town?"

"Nope." Buell shifted uneasily in his saddle. "Andy Lane recorded it for him. So, you see, Lane—and there's bound to be some others—knows about it. That's why we don't dare use these guns."

Mulqueen's fury showed in the twitching of his lips, the blazing of his eyes. "For ten years I run my sheep over a range," he said. "Then

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a tramp prospector comes along and, right under my nose—"

"Your nose looks kinda bad, Wedge."

"Never mind that, you boar ape!" Mulqueen snarled. "I want that gold. I don't want folks hootin' at me all the rest of my life, sayin' I was grazin' my sheep over a gold mine and was too blind—" He paused a moment. "I'm goin' over to that V and see if I can *buy* into that find. If, for maybe a few hundred dollars— You watch the sheep, Tobe!"

Mulqueen rode away, toward the junction of Granite and Horseshoe creeks. He wished now that he hadn't been in such a hurry to change that location notice last night. Now Jim Sanbrook would know, if he had been back to the claim, that his ex-employer, supposed to be a respectable if somewhat tight-fisted stockman, was a claim jumper at heart, as well as a would-be murderer. Yet, Mulqueen set a great deal of store by the power of money, probably because he had always worshiped it so much.

IT was an apparently humble, contrite Wedge Mulqueen who rode down to Granite Creek, who finally dismounted and walked rather quietly, almost sneakingly, up to the spot where two men were sitting on a rock, talking.

Small, elderly Andy Lane, Wedge discovered, was sharing that rock with Jim Sanbrook. Lane was saying: "I'd sure like to get in on this strike, Jim. But I haven't got much money."

That angered Wedge Mulqueen. Lane was trying to buy in with Sanbrook.

Mulqueen advanced faster now; and, when Sanbrook turned to face him, Mulqueen said: "Howdy, Jim. I hope you ain't too mad about things that've happened. I come up to tell you that loco, half-witted nephew of mine thought he was bein' smart last night. He come up here and changed the notice on your location. I just want you to know that—"

"Did he?" Jim Sanbrook said. "I thought *that* was done after Tobe Buell had started ridin' down the mountain. Thought it kinda looked like *your* handwritin', Mulqueen. I'm wrong, maybe."

"Them rock samples you had looked pretty fair," Mulqueen remarked, disregarding Sanbrook's observations.

"Which is more'n can be said for your snout," cut in old Andy Lane. "You got me down once, Mulqueen,

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and slanted my nose the way it is. Now, danged if I don't believe yours is goin' to look worse!" He grinned.

"Yeah," said Jim Sanbrook. "It's so much bigger."

Wrath assailed Wedge Mulqueen, yet he felt there was too much at stake. He must not give way to temper—even if he dared risk another assault. "You'll need money to develop this thing, Jim. And, while I ain't got any cash, I've got all them sheep—good sheep—over there."

"What makes you think Jim—a white man—would want *you* for a pard, Mulqueen?" asked Andy Lane.

"You keep outa this, or I'll—"

"Nope," said the small, elderly sheepman. "I pack a gun now, you notice, Mulqueen. You ever jump me again you'd better come shootin'."

Mulqueen swallowed his anger again, turned to Jim Sanbrook. "How about it, Jim?"

"I don't think so," came the short reply. "You'd want to run things, Mulqueen. Want me to believe that a bunch of sheep was worth half a vein of stuff this rich!" He exhibited another rather large chunk of ore.

The sunlight danced on yellow particles of gold, a light that made Mulqueen's pulse beat faster. He started to persuade, and was begging Sanbrook for a half interest in his claim when Tobe Buell came riding up.

Mulqueen whirled on his nephew and growled: "Get back to camp and stay with them sheep like I told you!"

Buell didn't look at his uncle. He was watching the hostility on the face of Jim Sanbrook that started Tobe Buell's hand moving slowly toward the gun at his hip.

"No, you don't, Buell!" snapped old Andy Lane, and deftly whipped out his own six-shooter. "Better take that gun off him, Jim. And if either him or Mulqueen makes a false move, I'll—"

Jim Sanbrook moved quickly, yanked the gun from Buell's holster, then yanked Buell himself off his horse. "All right, boar ape. We've got a little matter to settle." Jim stung him with a sharp slap.

BUELL swore, rushed into the fray while Andy Lane, holding two guns now, watched Mulqueen. Buell almost floored Jim with a lucky blow to the head, but that was the last solid punch he landed. Jim Sanbrook was stronger, faster today than when he had whipped Mulqueen last night. He ripped blows to Buell's face and body, knocked the wind out of him, spun him around with a neck-twisting jolt to the side of the face; then Jim brought him down like a felled beef steer with a right smash to the mouth.

"Good for you, Jim," said Mulqueen. "I didn't want that boar ape to help me out last night when I tackled you. I like fair play and—"

"Yeah, sure," Jim cut in. "I thought maybe it was just a mistake last night when you and Tobe doubled up on me."

"Now they both know dang well it was," said Andy Lane dryly. "Look at 'em. If they ain't a sight to scare children!"

Mulqueen wished he had Lane alone and that the latter had no gun. Yet, the sight of gold-bearing ore was blinding Mulqueen more than was hate now. "I've got about nine thousands dollars' worth of sheep," he said. "We could see 'em, Jim. That'd give us money enough to do a lot of development work. But I don't want Lane in on the deal!"

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Andy Lane spoke to Jim. "Maybe you'd better take him up on his proposition, Jim. Give him a half interest in this claim here. I haven't got money to put into—"

"Well—" Jim hesitated.

"Let's fix up the papers now," Mulqueen said quickly. "I'll give you a bill of sale for my sheep, and you give me a half interest in this—"

"A third," Jim Sanbrook bargained.

"All right, a third," Mulqueen agreed. "Lane can witness the deal."

"Fair enough, Mulqueen," Jim Sanbrook agreed. "You're goin' to be my new pard in this claim."

Within a few minutes the bill was signed, and Mulqueen possessed a one-third interest in the claim at the junction of Granite and Horseshoe creeks, while Jim Sanbrook owned a band of sheep.

"I guess we'd better go and drive those woollies over to your range, Andy," Jim advised Lane.

"Why?" Mulqueen demanded. "Ain't you goin' to sell 'em, get money to develop this—"

"I don't think I'll spend any money here," Jim answered, pocketing the gun that he had taken from Tobe Buell. "What's the matter, Wedge? Can't you read?"

"Not much. Why?" said Mulqueen.

"I thought it was funny that, when he rushed down to record a jumped claim last night, he didn't get the location of the *real* claim, two miles west of here, where this gold ore come from," said Jim calmly. "I didn't stake this place till I seen you followin' me last night, Mulqueen. Of course, there might be gold here. It's all yours if you find it."

Mulqueen gaped, began to tremble. "Why, you—" He reached for the .45 concealed within the waistband of his overalls. But that gun was hardly in the clear when Jim Sanbrook, pulling the gun from his pocket, sent a bullet ripping through Mulqueen's right arm.

The sheepman's weapon clattered to the earth as he spun around. Tobe Buell, still on the ground, tried to grab the fallen gun; but a bullet from old Andy Lane's six shooter furrowed the back of Buell's extended hand, and he jerked it back as if he had touched a hot stove.

"You can't take them sheep of mine!" Mulqueen yelled.

"Why not?" Jim asked. "You tried to take what you thought was a gold mine, didn't you? And you tried to take my life last night—with an empty gun. Them sheep's goin' to be trailed over to Andy's range. And he's goin' to have half of 'em, as well as the interest he's already got in a *real* minin' claim. You're payin' him for bustin' his nose, Mulqueen. And, if you and your scum relation there didn't get bullets through your hearts, which you deserve, you're gettin' the chance to mine this granite V. So hop to it!"

Mulqueen whirled on his nephew and yelled: "You damned half-wit! Why didn't you check up on the location?" Mulqueen could restrain himself no longer. Using his left hand, he started hammering at Buell. And Buell, able to use only his left hand, started hammering back.

They were still cursing, still threshing around there on the grass, when Jim Sanbrook and Andy Lane, partners now in a nice big bunch of sheep as well as partners in a mine that promised a fortune, rode out of sight.

THE END.

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THE QUARTER HORSE

by Jim West

WHENEVER a Western cattleman talks about his string of Quarter horses there is bound to be a gleam in his eye and a ring of pride in his voice, particularly if he refers to them as Steeldusts. A good Steeldust packs a lot of horse in a medium-sized package.

Quarter horse, or Steeldust. Some use the terms more or less interchangeably although this is not strictly correct. Both animals are essentially the same type, and it is usually conceded that the Quarter horse as a stock horse originated in Texas through crossing Thoroughbred stallions with blocky, native pony mares. Steeldusts are a famous

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line of these Quarter horses, but not all Quarter horses actually carry the Steeldust strain. In the past both the term "Quarter horse" and the designation "Steeldust" have been loosely used. Men have called horses Steeldusts merely because they resembled the Steeldust type in size and build. Owing to the reputation of the real Quarter horses and Steeldusts, some persons may readily have referred to a horse not even of the correct type as a Steeldust, either to increase its selling value, or because they were honestly misinformed.

Stories concerning the start of the Steeldusts vary. One version has it that Steeldust, a Thoroughbred stallion, was brought into Texas from Kentucky nearly a hundred years ago. He won fame as a racer, and wide popularity as a sire. From him the genuine Steeldust blood lines spread throughout the Lone Star State.

Regardless of how the Steeldust strain began, the Quarter horse, as a type, is an animal that was and is hard to beat for cow-country range work. Quarter horses have always been known as top-grade stock animals throughout the prickly pear and mesquite-dotted grass sections of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona.

They are trim, stocky, close-coupled creatures with well-developed backs and sturdy but not overly long legs. As a rule they carry considerable weight for their height. Grand champion, Del Rio Joe, is credited with a weight of eleven hundred and eighty pounds; height fourteen and a fraction hands. To conform to the breed, a Quarter horse should stand a little over fourteen hands high, and weigh in the neighborhood of eleven hundred pounds.

IN addition to their solid structure, these horses have amazing speed, plenty of intelligence, level-headed dispositions and a capacity for work that many old-time cattlemen claim is absolutely unsurpassed by any other stock horse. That's high praise, but the Quarter horse earned this accolade through years of faithful service in the West. He grew up with the cow country.

The animals make excellent ropers. In the days of the open range before branding chutes and other labor-saving devices were inaugurated Quarter horses were used extensively for working beef herds at branding time. A lot of these horses developed as much cow savvy as their riders, and that's no insult to the men who rode them. The cowboys will admit it themselves.

A good Quarter horse knew his job and the part he had to play as well as the roper knew his. Man and horse worked together as a precision team of highly-trained specialists.

Cow-country horses used in working stock must have a wide variety of accomplishments. Mere speed is not enough. A roping horse has to keep his wits about him at all times, be able to stop on the proverbial dime, know how to pivot like a whirling dervish and be capable of making an abrupt turn or change in direction while he is going ahead full tilt. He has got to have stamina to stand the grueling work he will be put to under all sorts of weather conditions.

There is a reason for each of these special skills and qualities that go into the make-up of a cow horse. The animal must be able to stop instantly so that he can halt and hold back the moment his rider has made

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his cast and roped his quarry. He must moreover be able to do it instinctively. A cowboy has little time at such a moment to give him specific orders.

Roped steers commonly run around in frantic, head-tossing circles, or try to. Therefore, it is up to the roping horse to pivot with the animal in order to keep his rider from being wrapped in encircling turns of rope, a predicament that obviously could be very dangerous to the cowboy should the steer get a chance to plunge his whole weight against coils wound taut about the roper's body.

Fleeing steers usually pursue an erratic course, dodging this way and that in their efforts to elude a lariat swinger. Unless the cowboy's mount is trained to make these same swift changes in direction, the horse will lose more steers than the man on his back can catch with his throw line. Range work, in other words, requires a lot more than mere obedience from a horse. It necessitates intelligent co-operation plus a general understanding of what the man in the saddle is trying to do.

No matter how smart and willing a horse might be, if he tires easily and is unable to stand the gaff of top-speed work under a broiling sun he is never much good to a busy roper at branding time in Texas and the Southwest. Stamina has always been as important as other qualities in a Texas stock horse.

For roping and other range work it is generally conceded that the Quarter horse, as developed in the early days, was unexcelled. Today contest ropers in rodeos, where speed and intelligence are paramount considerations in a roping horse, frequently rely on Quarter horses to help them win the prize money.

When polo was first introduced into this country Quarter horses were in great demand as polo ponies. The same abilities that enabled them to run down a dodging cow critter made them ideal for chasing a bounding ball on the more circumscribed polo field. It was only when a change in the game permitted the use of larger animals that Quarter horses were superseded by horses of a purer Thoroughbred strain.

FOR a time the all-around demand for larger animals, even on the range, caused a regrettable depression in the business of raising Quarter horses. Stockmen found that in spite of their history and heritage, Quarter horses weren't a profitable investment, or so some of them said. However a strain as famous and colorful as Western Quarter horses are, could never be allowed to die out completely. Many old-time cattle and stockmen as well as Quarter horse boosters everywhere have been cheered to note that lately these fine examples of the kind of horse that was a favorite in working the open range in the early days have been staging a definite comeback in popularity.

Revived interest resulted not long ago in the formation of the American Quarter Horse Association together with official recognition of the Quarter horse as a breed rather than simply a "type" of horse. Even more recently a Quarter Horse Stud Book was established for keeping a permanent record of pure Quarter-horse blood lines.

Give a man a horse and he'll ride him. Give two men a horse each and they'll race them. As its name implies, originally a Quarter horse was simply a fast horse in short races over a quarter-mile course. Almost any animal that could consistently

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win purses for its owner in this short distance, and often impromptu, racing was likely to become known as a "Quarter" horse.

These races were popular among the early settlers in Texas, some of whom in the interests of good horseflesh and a desire to attain victory over their rivals undoubtedly imported fast horses with an established quarter-mile reputation from the older States where such races were an organized pastime. These short races were a regular diversion, for example, among the wealthy cotton planters in the early South. Many of Texas' pioneers came from the Southern States. What more natural, therefore, than that they should send back for a famous Quarter horse to beat the best their new neighbors in Texas owned? For Steeldust from Kentucky, for instance, or some stories have it, for one of Steeldust's colts.

Other sections besides the South are noted for Quarter horses and quarter-mile horse races. Illinois is one of these that produced a well-known Quarter horse family of its own, the famous Dan Tucker-Peter McCue line. Quarter horses of this strain compare favorably even with the Steeldusts. A colt of Peter McCue was taken to Texas and served as a top sire on a prominent Quarter-horse ranch there.

WITH this general background it is easy to understand why there is confusion concerning the exact origin and lineage of the Western Quarter horse as a stock animal. However, it is what the horse developed into that counts more than how the breed began, and the Quarter horse certainly turned into a fine all-around animal.

Gradually certain "type" characteristics were established in Quarter horses. These horses were bred among themselves until conformity became regular and the former "type" moved up into the class of a separate breed.

Incidentally it is claimed that the record for a quarter mile was made not by one, but three different Quarter horses each of them covering the route in twenty-one and a quarter seconds over a straight course. The horses were Judge Thomas, San F. and Bob Wade, the last named making his record at four years old in Butte, Montana, in 1890. As far as we know, the record still stands and is officially recognized by the Jockey Club.

What matter then that in the past Quarter horses have been bred more for type and accomplishment than from recorded blood lines? Their ancestry may be muddy in spots. In fact, few Quarter horses today, though showing absolute conformity in size, performance and other characteristics, can lay honest claim to a simon-pure lineage. This country has been the great melting pot of horses as well as peoples, especially the West, so far as the horses are concerned.

Out of the welter of the Quarter horse's mixed background one thing at least is certain. The Quarter horse, as he was developed in the Southwestern cow country, is a truly outstanding breed. He is fast, alert and capable of carrying out any range job he has been or is likely to be called upon to perform by his exacting rider.

If you don't believe it, ask the man that owns a Steeldust. Or any man that has raised them.

THE END

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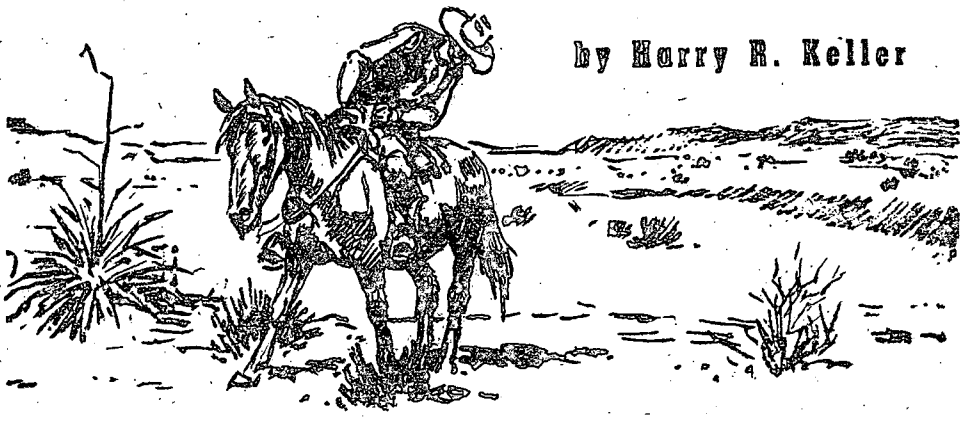

by Harry R. Keller

COLD-TRACK DAN

Into our camp on Powder Bend
  There rode a lanky man.
Says he: "I hail from up the trail;
  They call me Cold-track Dan.
I follow fishes through the wave,
  Or birds across the blue;
And if you have a tracking job,
  I'll prove the same to you."

The boss says: "See that broom-tail nag?
  He joined our band today.
Just take his track and trail it back
  Across the Brimstone Way.
If you can find the range he's from,
  And where his trail began,
The place for you is with my crew."
  "You're on!" said Cold-track Dan.

We watched him as he rode from sight,
  Back-tracking that lone stray
Beneath the dry and burning sky
  That guards the Brimstone Way.
A day slipped past, a week, a month,
  And still no word had come
To hint that we would ever see
  That bragging saddle bum.

Next spring I joined another spread
  Two hundred miles away;
And on that strange and distant range
  I met a man one day.
His eyes were on a fading trail
  Where tracks showed, small and dim.
'Twas Cold-track Dan, the mouthy man!
  And so I greeted him.

He pointed to the hoofprints small,
  And then I got a jolt.
Says he, "I've tracked the critter back
  To where he was a colt.
Beyond this hilltop, or the next,
  I think the trail will end;
And then I aim to go and claim
  My job at Powder Bend!"

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Missing Department

KENNEDY, DANIEL—Born near Nenagh County, Tipperary, Ireland, was last heard from in 1910, when we had a letter from him postmarked from Helena. In 1909 he was at Gilt Edge. Worked in mines at Maiden. Used to stay at Con Kelly's Hotel in Helena, and in 1909 asked that letters be sent to Bristol House, Helena. He may have gone into Canada or some bordering States. The above is all I know about this man, but my father in Ireland has asked me to do all I could to find out if he is living or dead. If anyone knows his whereabouts, or has any information concerning him, please write to me.—"J. K.," care of Missing Department, Western Story

TOWNDROW, MRS. ROY (nee IDA DANIELS)—I have received information that she is married again and living in Hot Springs, New Mexico. Do not know how to locate her if she is married again, because I do not know what her name would be. She is about thirty years of age, slender, blonde and has blue eyes. "Pat, if you see this, write to your old pal."—Mrs. Edgar Pounds, care of Mrs. Allie Pounds, New Castle, Texas

LACEY, LENORA GRACE—She is my daughter, twenty years old, has light-brown curly hair, gray eyes, and is about five feet tall. She ran away from home August 11 1939, and has not been heard of since. I have one boy in the service, another going, as well as my husband. I would like to find my daughter. I am not well from worrying over her. If anyone knows her whereabouts, please get in touch with me or tell her to write to her mother.—Mrs. Nora Lacey, Box 15, Smith Ferry, Pennsylvania

LUNDGREN, VICTOR EMIL and CARL ELMER—They are my father's brothers and were last seen in San Ardo California, in 1901. They were both blacksmiths. They would be about seventy-one and seventy-six years old, respectively. If anyone has any information concerning them, please get in touch with me as we are very anxious to find some trace of them. —R. C. Lundgren, 300 West Main Street, Santa Maria, California

HANAN, MRS. LORENA BELL—She is my cousin. About forty-five years old, fair complexion, red hair and blue eyes, about six feet tall. I haven't seen her in fourteen years and it's been twelve since I heard from her. She has a daughter, Mary Bell Hanan. "Rena, your mother passed away in February. She loved you to the last. Please write to your cousin, Ruth." —Ruth Cupples, Eagleville, Missouri.

• There is no charge for the insertion of requests for information concerning missing relatives or friends.

While it will be better to use your name in the notices, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to anyone who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

Address all your communications to Missing Department, Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

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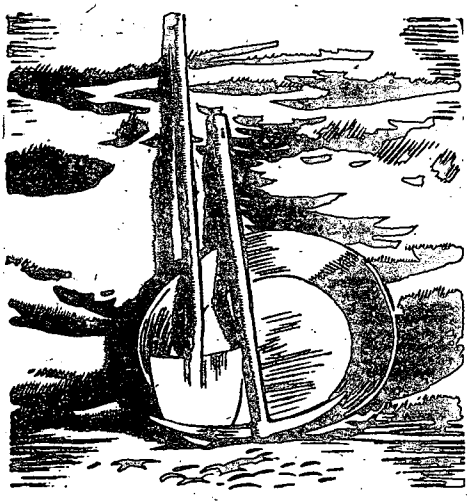

Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

NUGGETS are heavy, yellow stones of almost solid gold. Hammer them and they merely flatten out instead of crumbling to powder as do most rocks. That is because gold is a soft and malleable metal.

The value of a nugget depends on its size and the purity of the gold it contains. Though they are usually weighed in ounces, the bigger ones may be weighed in pounds. Nuggets weighing over a hundred troy pounds have been recorded, and a single nugget may mean as much to a placer prospector as a whole month's take in dust or small colors. An exceptional nugget might be equivalent to a season's work.

Unfortunately, big nuggets are a comparatively rare occurrence. A placer-gold prospector can hope to find one, but he can't *count* on it. That's no reason, however, for forgetting that they *do* occur, or for not looking for them in every shovelful of pay dirt.

Nuggets have been found to a greater or less extent in all the notable placer-gold districts and there is no telling where or when the next one may show up in the gold miner's test pan, his rocker or his sluice box. The actual value of these precious gold "rocks" may run from a few dollars for the smaller pieces up to hundreds and even thousands of dollars for a single lump of yellow metal.

Nuggets in this latter class were fairly common in the early days in the rich California placer diggings along the Mother Lode. Even today they are found occasionally and one such stone may represent a happy nest egg for the lucky discoverer.

L. A. is interested, his letter from Mobile, Alabama, says, in gold nuggets, particularly the larger ones. "What," he asks, "is the biggest nugget ever found? Where was it found? Where in the United States have the biggest nuggets come from? Can you tell me how big they were?"

Generally conceded to be the biggest actual gold nugget discovery on record, L. A., is the so-called Welcome Nugget, a 182-pound chunk of yellow metal. It was found "down under" in Australia at Bakery Hill in the Ballarat gold diggings in 1858. The rock was roughly worth about fifty thousand dollars, a good day's work for any hard-digging gold prospector.

Australia produced some other top-size nuggets, too, the Blanche Barkley, for instance, that weighed 146 pounds. Imagine striking a golden boulder like that with your pick, or trying to run it through a sluice box!

Though virtually all the bonanza diggings of the early West produced their share of nuggets in the several hundred to a thousand dollars or more class, most of the really big

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ones came from the California fields. What appears to be the biggest California nugget on record came from Carson Hill near Angels Camp in Calaveras County. It was found in 1854 and weighed 108 pounds. Four pounds of the rock was adhering quartz, the rest, 104 pounds, was solid gold.

An old report of the director of the mint in Washington gives some illuminating data on other big nugget finds of the hey day period of placer mining in California. In 1850 at Holden's Garden, Sonora, a single "mass of quartz and gold" was uncovered having an estimated value of $30,000. A 28-pound hunk of gold having a value of $7,500 was dug up at Sullivan's Creek in 1849. On Knapp's Ranch, east of Columbia, a prospector dug up a slab-shaped mass of rock 14 inches long by 9 inches wide by 5 inches thick. It was mostly pure gold; its value $8,500.

Bigger still was the quartz-and-gold nugget produced in 1860 at Sierra Buttes in Sierra County. It contained nearly $18,000 worth of gold. Sierra County also produced a $10,000 nugget at French Ravine in 1855, and previous to that in the same locality a nugget worth $8,000 in 1851, and one worth $5,000 in 1850. Other sections of the same county such as Smith's Flat and Little Grizzly disclosed rocks of yellow gold with values of anywhere from $1,500 to $3,000. Nuggets below the $1,000 mark were more common. They weren't considered important enough to rate a special mention.

Gold nuggets worthy of being included in the record likewise came from many of the other counties scattered along the Mother Lode. On the American River, two miles from Michigan Bluffs in Placer County, placer miners in 1764 encountered a nugget that went better than $4,000 in gold. A white quartz boulder literally inlaid with gold was picked up on Dutch Flat in the same county in 1876. Broken up, it yielded nearly $6,000 to its discoverers.

El Dorado County got on the bandwagon early with the discovery of a $1,000-rock of gold at Illinois Canyon near Georgetown in 1849. A similar nugget was picked up the following year in Hudson's Gulch. An $8,000 boulder of quartz and gold was uncovered at Pilot Hill in the same county in 1867, and a solid chunk of gold worth $3,500 came from the Spanish Dry Diggings in 1865.

Remington Hill, in Nevada County, was the scene of at least two finds deemed worthy of being included in the record. One, a $3,500 nugget, was discovered in 1855. The other, a $2,400 gold stone was picked up in 1867.

This is only a partial list. It illustrates how rich the early California diggings were and makes it more easy to understand why the rush to those lush fields of sudden fortune reached the proportions it did.

● We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

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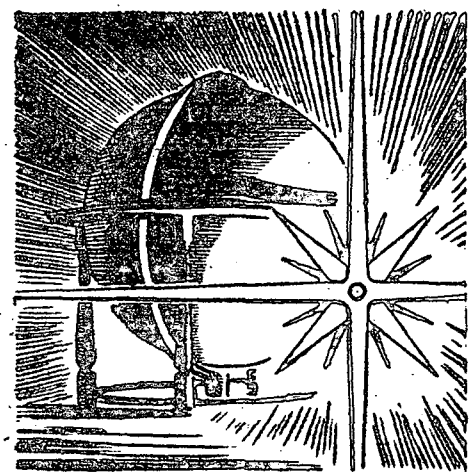

Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

HUNTERS, trappers and wilderness travelers the world over are generally familiar with "jerky" in some form or another. In Africa it is known as *biltong*. The Mexicans call it *charqui*, a corruption of the Peruvian Indian word, *quichua*, meaning strips of meat cut thin and dried without the use of salt. *Charqui* became "jerky" to Americans early in the history of the Southwest.

Whatever it is called, jerky is one of the best and most easily made available concentrated meat foods for the trail follower traveling light, or the man who must fend for himself for long months in the back country. Pound for pound, it contains twice the nourishment of fresh meat. It can be ground up and the powder added to soups; it can be cut into chunks and stewed; it can be fried, or eaten *raw*.

Properly prepared, jerked meat shouldn't spoil for months and months. It doesn't freeze, which makes it handy in the Far North. In addition it contains the full proportion of mineral salts, fats and proteins in the original meat. Only the water is removed in the drying or "jerking" process.

"I wish," A. O., of Manchester, New Hampshire, wrote us recently, "you would tell me something about the old-time camp food known as jerky, or jerked beef. How is it made? Can it be made in the North or only down in the Southwest where the desert sun is strong enough to dry it out?"

Glad to grant your wish, A. O., and answer those questions of yours concerning jerky, which by the way doesn't necessarily mean jerked beef. The early mountain men and the pioneers in the West frequently made their jerky out of buffalo meat. Deer meat, moose, caribou and even goat meat can be jerked. Elk-meat jerky for some reason doesn't keep as well as the others.

Originally, jerky meant meat dried in the sun without salt. The hot sun and dry air of the semi-arid desert country of the Southwest is particularly adapted to this type of "curing." Unsalted meat left hanging in strips doesn't putrify in that sort of a climate. It merely dries to a brittle, completely waterless, and generally leathery residue.

In such country the way to make jerky, the real way, is first to build a rectangular drying rack by driving four stout stakes about four or five feet long into the ground to represent the four corners. If forked stakes are available, fine. Two poles can be set in the forks to form the long sides of the rectangle. If forked stakes cannot be had, the poles will have to be lashed or otherwise securely fastened to the uprights. The rectangle should be about three

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feet wide and long enough to accommodate without crowding all the meat you wish to jerk. Five feet is usually ample length, but cut the poles long enough to extend somewhat beyond the ends of the stakes.

Next prepare a quantity of smaller sticks, about the thickness of a thumb and long enough to reach across the rectangle from side pole to side pole. These sticks form the meat racks. One system is to point the sticks at one end and spear the strips of meat on them for hanging. Another is simply to drape the meat lengths over the sticks. In either case the sticks should be free from bark.

The meat is then cut in as long strips as convenient. Keep the strips thin, not over a half inch thick at most. Impale the meat on the short sticks, or fold it over them and rack the sticks across the long poles. Avoid loading the sticks too heavily. One strip of meat should not touch another. This precaution should also be taken when the racks are set across the poles.

In the dry air of the arid Southwest once the racks are loaded, the sun will do the rest, extracting every drop of water from the meat and leaving the dried "jerky" with all its nutrition intact. The meat is ready or "jerked" when it becomes brittle. How long this will take depends on climate and weather. Practice and experience are the best teachers in telling when "jerky" is "done."

In other than desert climates, further north, say, or where the air is more moist, sun drying alone won't cure jerky satisfactorily and if tried the meat is liable to spoil. In such country this is overcome by building a very low fire under the racks of meat. The fire must not be hot enough to extract the meat juices or start "cooking" the meat but just hot enough to assist the sun in the drying process. The fire serves the additional purpose of keeping blowflies and other insects away from the meat.

Strictly speaking, meat should not be salted preparatory to being made into jerky. In actual practice, particularly in making jerky in more northern climes, the strips are often freely sprinkled with salt which is allowed to work into the meat an hour or two before the strips are exposed to the drying combination of sun and a low fire.

The salt reduces the chances of spoilage, but it has a tendency to draw the juices out of the meat and this removes some of the food value from the finished product.

To S. J., Terre Haute, Indiana: The tump line or head band is a practical addition to the pack harness, but usually required only when heavy loads are to be carried. Experienced trappers, guides and others in the Canadian north woods country can handle up to a three-hundred-pound load quite easily with the aid of a tump line.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

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To any regular reader of The Hollow Tree, Earl Hart will need no introduction. He's had four letters published over a period of years and, if our memory serves us well, Earl holds the all-time high record for corresponding with a Pen Pal—eighteen years! This patriotic member of our friendly corner has just donated his highly prized and complete file of Western Story magazines, dating from 1923, to aid his country's war effort and he needs no further recommendation than that to be our No. 1 Hollow Tree member. Here's his letter and we know you'll need no urging to annex him for your own Pen-Pal list.

Dear Miss Rivers:

Have been reading Western Story magazine every week for nineteen years and think it is the best Western on anybody's newsstand. Since 1923 I have preserved every copy of Western Story and just recently gave the whole works to aid my country's war effort. That is a tremendous weight off my sagging book shelves, but was more than glad to give them up to help exterminate Hitler and his satellites. This is the third time I have sent in a letter to the Hollow Tree. The last time was four years ago, and each time I gained many, many friends and have been corresponding with one of them for eighteen years! Would like to rope another bunch of pen friends and will answer every letter as I have in the past. My spare-time interests are music, drawing, reading, genealogy, and writing letters. My outdoor pastime is bicycling. I want lots of letters, folks, and I don't care if you are old or young.—Earl L. Hart, 1531 Harrison Avenue, S. W., Canton, Ohio

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Doris has lots of interests—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am interested in your Hollow Tree department and wonder if you could help me find some Pen Pals. I'm sixteen years old, a junior in high school and would like especially to hear from Pals my age. I'm interested in music, reading, and just about all sports, especially golf, swimming and bowling. This last summer I did a lot of dancing at U. S. O. and Service clubs. I am sincerely hoping to hear from someone.—Doris Teigen, Lake Mills, Iowa

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Hand-made gifts to the first fifteen—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like to have my plea for Pen Pals printed. I am a young man twenty-four years of age, have blue eyes, dark wavy hair, and am five feet eight inches tall. My hobbies are making new friends, collecting photos and doing wood work. I am extremely fond of music, good books, outdoor sports and dancing. I would like to hear from boys and girls from twenty to thirty years of age and will send a picture and a handmade gift to the first fifteen who write. All you Hollow Tree readers get busy and start writing to a lonesome California boy. Everyone is welcome and I'm sure we'll all be real friends—William J. Guren, 331 South Flower Street, Los Angeles, California

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No age limit here—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I'm hoping you will publish my plea for Pen Pals and also that I will receive many answers. I'm a tall brunette, fond of sports and dancing. I hope to hear from girls and boys of any age. I promise to answer all letters promptly and would enjoy exchanging snapshots. Carolyn Columbia, Westport Point, Massachusetts

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Alice is a lonesome farm girl—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a farm girl fifteen years old and very lonely. I have brown hair, blue eyes and am five feet four inches tall. I have quite a few hobbies—one of them is collecting snapshots—and like to dance, swim and roller skate. I promise to answer all letters from Pals between fifteen and twenty-four years of age, so come on and sling some ink out a lonely North Dakota gal's way.—Alice Jensen, Edinburg, North Dakota

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A young Hollow Tree member—

Dear Miss Rivers:
This is the first time I have written to the Hollow Tree and I hope you will print my letter, as I want many Pen Pals. I am a boy of thirteen, have gray-green eyes and blond hair, and am five feet tall. My favorite sports are basketball, boat riding and bicycle riding.—Don Seaquist, McCall, Idaho

Calling middle-aged Westerners—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I hope there is a place in the Hollow Tree for my plea. I am a lonely widow and would like some Pen Pals fifty-five years of age and older. I am five feet two inches tall, have light hair and brown eyes. I prefer to hear from the opposite sex from the Western States, so come on, you Pen Pals, and send some letters this way. Mrs. Bertha Walters, c/o Olva Fraser, 3388 Moak Street, Port Huron, Michigan

You have a good chance, Bette—

Dear Miss Rivers:
Do I stand a chance to make some friends? I'm a teen-age girl from Massachusetts, have blond hair and blue eyes, and am five feet tall. I like dancing, bowling, roller skating and am easy to get along with. Come on, my friends, and sling some ink this way. I'll exchange photos, and those who send me snaps of themselves will get the first replies.—Bette Wright, 147 Wareham Street, Middleboro, Massachusetts

Pals from everywhere are welcome—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I have been reading the Hollow Tree for some time and decided to write to you. I would like to have Pen Pals from everywhere write to me. I promise to answer all letters. I am nineteen years old, and my favorite pastimes are collecting picture cards and going to the movies. I'll be waiting for some letters.—Viola Rasmussen, Route No. 1, Box 159, Orchards, Washington

Mae collects movie stars' pictures—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a lonely girl who would like to have Pen Pals, boys from everywhere, and will answer all letters. I am a sophomore in high school and have blond hair and gray eyes. My hobby is collecting movie stars' pictures and stamps. I'm five feet two and weigh 103 pounds. I like outdoor sports, dancing, reading, and the movies. —Mae Croskrey, Route No. 1, Kalispell, Montana

Betty only gets to town once a week—

Dear Miss Rivers:
Well here is my first plea for Pen Pals, and I hope it is printed. I live seven miles out in the country and get to go to town about once a week for the mail, so come on, boys and girls, and fill my mailbox to the top, will yuh? I am thirteen years old and in the eighth grade. I have dark-brown hair, blue eyes and am five feet three inches tall. My favorite pastimes are horseback riding, bicycle riding and collecting scenic post cards. I will answer every card and letter and will exchange snapshots, so, everybody, write and fill the mailbox of a very lonely girl.—Betty Lee Anson, Grady, New Mexico

Annette likes all sports—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a teen-aged girl who enjoys all sports, both outdoors and indoors—to mention a few, they are swimming, tennis and skating. I am five feet six inches tall, weigh 120 pounds and have black eyes and long, naturally wavy, dark-brown hair. I will answer all who write me, and the age limit is sky-high, so come on, boys and girls, and give me a chance.—Annette Schonberger, 488 Ocean Avenue, Jersey City, New Jersey

Cliff and Tiny need friends—

Dear Miss Rivers:
Please don't let this plea for Pen Pals land in the wastepaper basket, because my sister and I are in need of Pen Pals. Cliff is fifteen and I am fourteen. Our hobbies are collecting post cards and match-book covers. Come on and write, you Pen Pals.—Cliff and Tiny Johnston, Route No. 2, Dry Branch, Georgia

Cowboy songs appeal to Anna—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I would like to receive letters from boys and girls from the West. I like all sports, and my hobby is collecting Western and cowboy songs. I am fifteen years old and have light-brown hair and blue eyes. I will exchange pictures and answer all letters, so please write.—Anna Pelizzari, 15 Neck Road, Clinton, Connecticut

Faye is ready to cheer you up—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am seventeen years old and have blond hair and blue eyes. I am looking for some interesting Pen Pals from all over the United States. Would especially like to hear from cowboys and cowgirls, as well as boys who are far away from home and lonesome. I promise faithfully to answer all letters, so come on and fill my mailbox to the top.—Faye Henson, Route No. 2, Coleman, Texas

From Oklahoma comes this plea—

Dear Miss Rivers:
Here's another lonely teen-age girl looking for Pen Pals. I have light-brown hair, blue eyes and am five feet three inches tall. I like all sports and promise to answer all letters that come my way. So come on, boys and girls, and write to me.—Bonnie Louise Culp, Sharon, Oklahoma

Carol's hope is realized—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I have finally decided to send in my plea for Pen Pals and I sure hope I see it in print. I am sixteen years young and have dark-blond hair and blue eyes. I would like to correspond with boys and girls all over the United States and promise to answer all letters.—Carol Noha, Box 293, Cameron, Wisconsin

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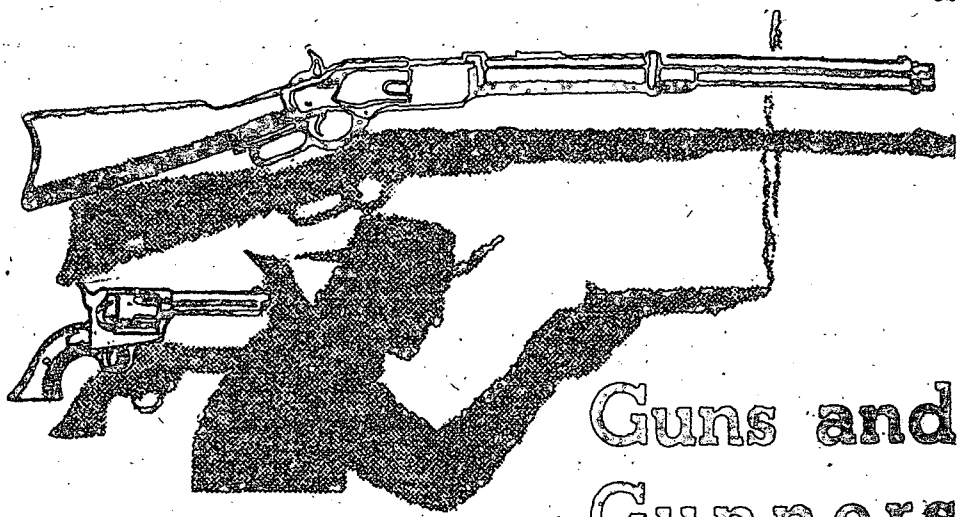

Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

WITH World War II now going on, we've been checking up a bit on World War I. Some amazing records of munitions manufacture were established a quarter century ago, but they are like the proverbial "drop in the bucket" as compared with present-day production.

Naturally, nothing can be said about today's weapons, methods of manufacture and production figures, but when these figures are made available following the war, most of the boys are going to be astounded. Also the old methods of making firearms will fall into the discard due to wartime developments of modern machinery, doing things faster and better—and more cheaply.

American production methods have always been superior to those used in foreign lands. For example, take the British Enfield Model 1914, made in huge quantities in American plants for England in the First World War.

Military demands usually set the methods of manufacture, often without regard to cost! Winchester at New Haven, Remington at Ilion, and the Eddystone Arsenal, operated by Remington, was turning these out for the British at a cost of $42 each.

In 1917 we needed more rifles than Springfield Armory could possibly produce, and General Thompson (of "Tommy" sub-machine gun fame), then Director of Arsenals, arranged to chamber these guns for our own service cartridges. Thus was our "Model 1917 rifle" born.

The first thing we did was standardize parts to make them interchangeable. Action parts made in New Haven must fit in a rifle made in Ilion or at Eddystone. This job speeded up production. It also cut our cost per rifle from the $42 figure to $26.

The fastest mechanic at any three of these factories prior to 1917 had set an assembly record of fifty guns in one day (eight working hours). After American methods and standardization were established, the record was 280 rifles in the same time, and all assemblers in the three plants averaged 250 rifles each per day!

The United States bought the entire output. During the war, we made 2,506,307 rifles. Of these, 312,878 were Springfields made at

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Springfield Armory and at Rock Island Arsenal, Illinois.

We started the last war with a reserve of 600,000 Springfields and 160,000 obsolete Krags. We purchased 20,000 Model 1905 Ross rifles from the Canadian government, and took over 280,049 rifles made for Russia, giving us a total of 3,575,356 rifles.

In addition the army bought between 30,000 and 40,000 Winchester and Remington sawed-off riot shotguns in 12 gauge, using them with buckshot to guard German prisoners.

Ammunition manufacture, then considered tremendous, won't compare with today's methods of production.

The United States Cartridge Co., a private maker now out of business, located at Lowell, Mass., had the largest ammunition plant and produced during the war, 686,000,000 .303 British Mark VII cartridges for the British government, also 5,000,000 .303 British blanks 6,000,000 .303 British primed shells for loading elsewhere; 200,000,000 7.62 m/m Russian cartridges for the Russian government; 100,000,000 6.5 m/m Service cartridges for the Holland government; 83,000,000 9 m/m Service cartridges for Italy (These were for machine guns only, not the Italian 6.5 m/m rifle); 877,000,000 Service cartridges for the United States; 1,890,000 blanks for the United States and a few others.

This same firm produced 800,000 dummy cartridges for the United States for training purposes, 19,000,000 8 m/m Lebel primed shells for the French, 2,000,000 bullets only for the United States to be loaded elsewhere, 125,000,000 .45 auto pistol cartridges for Uncle Sam, and 100,000 .30/30 Winchester cartridges for England for guard duty.

That's not all: The United States Cartridge Co. made 34,000,000 .22 short rifle cartridges for England for training purposes and 13,000,000 .22 long rifles for the same, plus 33,131,000 artillery primers for France; 75,000,000 artillery shells for the United States, 5,227,000 heavy artillery primers for the United States; 8,693,000 French "75" artillery primers for Uncle Sam, 59,341,000 small primers, caps and fuses for the British and Russians and for Uncle Sam, again, 1,000,000 12 gauge buckshot loads and 2,000,000 propelling charges for trench mortars.

That's one firm. Winchester supplied the United States Army with more than 900,000,000 different pieces, including Browning machine rifles, regulation bayonets, Model 1917 rifles, trench shotguns, ammunition, shells, primers, etc.

Today we are doing much better than these staggering figures. We've discovered methods of making rifle and machine gun barrels in one-tenth of the time. We no longer depend on the old methods of manufacturing ammunition; easier and quicker ways have been developed.

These modern manufacturing methods of today will be reflected in civilian sporting arms when we return to normalcy. New metals, precision manufacturing machines—all of these will make the American sporting arm, already the best in the world, superior to "pre-war" guns.

● **This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.** ***Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.***

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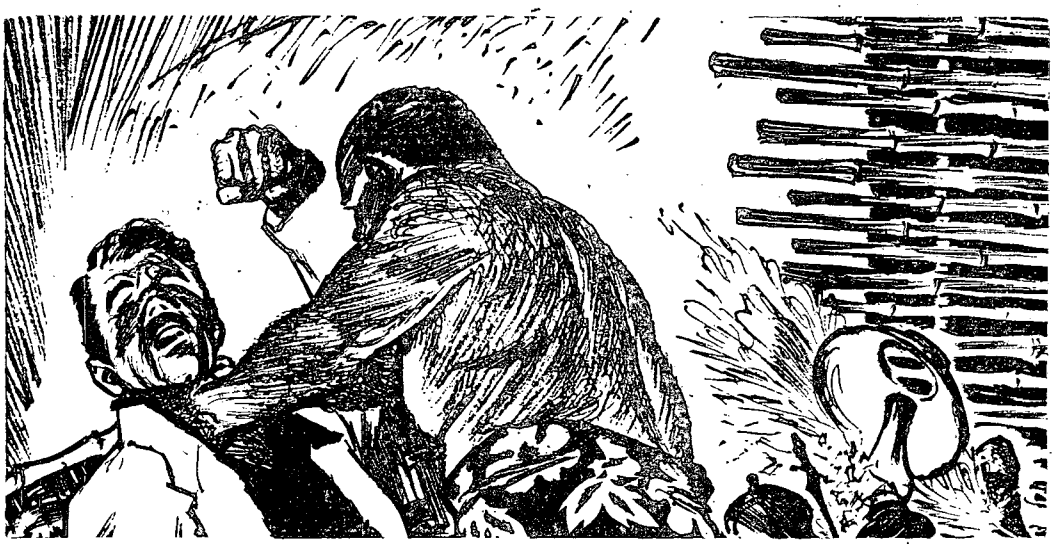

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The engine clattered to a stop and the passengers jumped to the ground. Somebody yelled, "Take 'em, boys!" and the fight started.

PART III

LORD OF THE Timber Trails

by Kenneth Gilbert

The Story So Far:

Returning to the little lumbering town of Stringtown in answer to a letter telling him of his brother Jim's suicide, Steve Brandon is passing the office of the Kenovan Mill Co. as a gang of five men stages a pay-roll holdup. One of the bandits takes a shot at Steve and he wakes up in jail suspected of being in on the robbery.

Steve is released from jail when Matt Kenovan, owner of the mill, decides not to press charges, and weighs an offer from Kenovan for the Goose Track, an unfinished logging railroad Steve has inherited

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from his brother. Also interested in the completion of the railroad is Jud Forsythe, a lumberman.

Promising to think over the offer, Steve leaves Kenovan's home. On the street, several men close in on him, blindfold and lead him away. Eventually they release him, warning him to get out of town. Removing his blindfold, he discovers that he is on a section of the Goose Track. He meets up with an old man, Dozey Peters, who is at first hostile, believing Steve is one of a gang of toughs working for a new and ruthless lumber outfit, Tidewater Logging Co. When Steve finally convinces Dozey of his identity, the old man tells him he can be top dog in Stringtown if he will finish the Goose Track himself.

Although there is considerable opposition when it is learned that Steve intends to complete the Goose Track, Jud Forsythe promises to use the railroad to haul his logs, provided it is in operation in thirty days—otherwise Steve has to agree to hand it over to Forsythe.

Dozey Peters promises to call a meeting of other old-timers in Stringtown and persuade them to help Steve. He fails to appear at the appointed time, however, and a little while later, one of his crew rushes into the saloon where the meeting is to be held, crying, "Brandon, they got Dozey!" and collapses.

CHAPTER XII

A CAPTIVE

THAT moment when the old-timer weaved across the floor of Dobie's saloon and fell almost at Steve Brandon's feet had the effect of a gunshot. It stilled all sound, and silence tightened until it seemed the atmosphere had the tensity of a bow string. Steve took a step forward and pulled the man to his feet.

"What about Dozey?" he demanded. "What happened?"

The man hung in his grip, half limp. "I . . . got away," he gasped. "They came out of the brush and grabbed Dozey and the others. I walloped one of 'em, but the others jumped me. I slugged it out a spell and got the best of 'em. Then I high-tracked it. But Dozey and the rest didn't get away!"

Steve Brandon swung around on the rest of the crowd. "You hear that?" he asked. "What goes on here? They didn't want Dozey to come back with his story. You know what that means? They're trying to block this thing, they're trying to kill Stringtown by choking off the Goose Track! You going to let 'em get away with it?"

He had broken the silence and their indecision.

"Brandon, we're back of you!" someone yelled. "We don't want trouble, but if the other side wants it, we'll give it to 'em." The thought seemed to catch fire, for the rest stirred and a current of eagerness went through them.

"We'll go out and bring Dozey in!" Steve announced.

"How'll you do that?" one man demanded. "It's a long drag to the end of the line. How'll we know where to look?" He indicated the man Steve was still supporting. "Benson couldn't make it back where the thing happened. He's all in!"

"There's a way, if it works!" Steve assured them. "You want to follow me? Not more than a dozen can go. Pick your men!"

"How'll you go?" asked another.

"There's a way," Brandon told them. "About a dozen of you, no more. I want men who aren't afraid of a scrap!"

He walked out of the place, and after a moment some of them followed him. Doc Willetts hurried forward and plucked at Steve's arm. "What's up, son?" he queried. Steve did not answer at first, for he was supporting the man Benson, who had brought him the story.

"Doc," he declared finally, "you'd best stay behind. I want such fighting men as I can get!"

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"What makes you think I can't scrap?" demanded Willetts hotly. "I'm in this, away up to my ears!"

"Then come on," Steve told him. "Luke Price has the answer. Whether we lose time depends on him!"

"You mean," asked Willetts, "that you figure on using that teapot he has locked up in the shed? Why, even if she has steam up, there's no proof that she'll hold to the rails. The Goose Track hasn't been used since the day it was built!"

"Dozey Peters said he bossed the job of building it," Steve replied. "I figure he didn't slur his work. It's worth trying!"

Suddenly Doc Willetts saw the strategy behind Steve's decision. If they could use the engine on the Goose Track, it would prove that the road was practical and needed only a few finishing touches; it would make a hit with Stringtowners who might still be lukewarm.

"Why," cried Willetts, "that's a stroke of genius! Come on, Steve!"

IT was an excited mob which bore down on Luke Price's place, and the man came out, alarmed, a shotgun in his hands. But Steve called out to him: "You got steam up? We want to use that engine!" Hurriedly he explained what he had in mind, and Luke shook his head doubtfully.

"Ol' Wheezer's still hot," he announced, "but she never had a full work-out on that line. No tellin' how long she'll stay on the rails!"

"There'll be no danger if we take it easy," Steve declared. "I'm betting on the job Dozey Peters did in building the line. If the engine rolls over, we've got enough man power here to put her back again!"

Price nodded and began stoking the firebox. The queer little logging engine, still simmering from the steam test Luke had given her, began to awaken as though she knew she was going to be called upon for an important task. At last Luke called out: "All right! I'll back out and turn her on the Y. Whoever is goin' can climb aboard then, She can't haul everybody!"

For that matter, not everybody wanted to go. The plan looked wild and risky, and they understood what might happen; and yet there were a number of them who thrilled at the prospect of a clash, who wanted to be on hand when the excitement started. Ol' Wheezer, her worm gears clanking at a speed much faster than her drive wheels turned, backed out of the shed, turned around and at last headed on the outward stretch of the Goose Track. Men, armed with clubs, pick handles and such other crude weapons as they could find, climbed aboard wherever they could find room. Then, with Steve Brandon standing beside him, Luke Price piloted the little engine cautiously along the unused track. The man Benson was there, too, strength recovered and eager for revenge.

Ol' Wheezer moved crazily from side to side, for the track sagged in spots, and several times it seemed to Steve that she was going to run into trouble. But just when it appeared certain that she would roll off the rails and down the built-up embankment, she would right herself and keep going.

"They jumped us nearly at the end of the line," Benson called above the clatter of the engine. Steve nodded and kept his eyes glued to the rails, down which weak illumination from Ol' Wheezer's oil headlight sprayed uncertainly. Grass and weeds which grew thickly between the rails were beaten down by the

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steady thrust of the sturdy little machine. Gabe Farrell alternated with others in stoking wood into the roaring maw of the firebox. Steve felt a mounting thrill as they moved along. This had worked! It was going to be the weapon by which he would overcome his foes. Luke Price turned toward him, then gestured ahead.

"Sunrise Creek!" Price yelled above the din of machinery. "That bridge never was tested. Pass the word to anybody who wants to get off. This could mean trouble!"

When Steve told the men what Luke had said, they shook their heads. They had confidence in Ol' Wheezer now, and they stayed aboard. The engine rolled and rumbled across the wooden structure, and went on. And at last the faint headlight revealed activity down the track.

"THERE they are!" cried Benson in Steve's ear. "Tearin' up the track!" Steve saw a gang of men bent over the rails, working swiftly. He wondered why they didn't stop as Ol' Wheezer bore down on them, and then a reason came into his mind.

Probably they had the rails torn up so that they knew Ol' Wheezer could go no farther, anyway; or, more likely, they believed that the appearance of the engine was part of their own plot. They might have figured that others of the gang had captured Ol' Wheezer and were trying to make away with it. The engine clattered to a stop within a few feet of them, and there was a yell of triumph as the passengers jumped to the ground.

"Take 'em, boys!" yelled somebody, and there was throaty response from the others. There was at least a dozen men who had clung to the engine, and there was only a comparative handful of those opposing them. The fight lasted seconds only, and then the men who had been working on the track fled abruptly into the darkness. All but one, who was dragged into the light from the engine.

"Why," Benson exclaimed delightedly, "it's—it's Curvo! The son of a gun slugged me from behind. I'll even that up—"

"Whoa!" commanded Steve. "We'll take care of Curvo, but not that way." Curvo, it came to him instantly, was going to be useful. "Where's Dozey Peters and the others?" Steve demanded of the man.

"Tied up down there in the brush," responded Curvo sullenly, with a jerk of his head. "We didn't hurt 'em none. Figured on turnin' 'em loose before mornin'." There were cries now from the direction Curvo had indicated, proving that he was speaking part of the truth, anyway. Some of the crowd rushed down there, and presently Dozey and his men, battered and thoroughly angered, appeared.

"Where'd they go?" Dozey demanded furiously. "You wall-eyed rat!" he raged at Curvo. "Ought to string you up to the nearest tree!" Then his amazement at the discovery that Ol' Wheezer had arrived under her own power overcame his anger. "Son of a gun!" he breathed in astonishment. "She made it. I knew that track was sound!" Then understanding came when he saw Benson. "I knew you'd got away," he told Benson, "but I never figured this would happen!"

"Who were they?" Steve asked, thinking of the gang they had routed. "Was Fengill there?"

"Didn't see him," Dozey replied. "But," he added inspiringly, "it

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won't take us long to find out. Curvo, here, will be glad to sing!"

"Like blazes I will!" retorted the man who was held captive by two of the victors. "I'll call that bluff right now!"

"Slip a rope around his neck and over a limb, and see if he's still tough!" someone yelled.

"No," declared Dozey positively. "I got a better idea!" He looked sharply at Steve and added: "I know one test no yellow rat can face! Come on! We'll take him back to my cabin. But we'll leave a guard here. Those wallopers might come back and try to finish the job!"

STEVE didn't understand what Dozey had in mind, but he appreciated the opportunity of getting Curvo to talk, if the latter would. That was one of the reasons why Steve had been desirous of forestalling the wrath of Benson and the others; Curvo could be made useful. But, short of torturing the man, there seemed no sound way of going about it.

Steve looked about him. Evidently the gang that had jumped Dozey's men had one objective in mind—to wreck the Goose Track, make it unusable. They had systematically torn up the rails for several hundred feet, where the steel ended. Their tools were still lying where they had dropped them. Even in the gloom of night Steve could make out the dark, shadowy wall of the forest not far ahead. That would be the Thunderbird tract, source of Jud Forsythe's strength, and the potential savior of Stringtown. Jim, Steve saw, had quit—or been forced to do so—when victory was almost in sight. The gang whom his men had beaten had vanished in that direction; but that fact held no significance, because the Thunderbird tract would merely offer cover. Steve raised his voice as he addressed the crowd.

"You've seen what we can do tonight," he told them. "All the Goose Track needs is a little work, and she'll be ready to haul every stick Jud Forsythe can cut. But time is short. When we tackle this job we've got to stay with it. Every foot of the line has to be worked on and watched at the same time. We'll need a sort of camp at this end of the line, another nearer Stringtown. We'll use Ol' Wheezer to haul supplies to you!"

Somewhere in the crowd was Doc Willetts. Steve hadn't seen him since they'd left Luke Price's place. But the medico had managed to cling to Ol' Wheezer and probably had taken part in the brief scrap. Now he stepped forward.

"I'm backing Steve Brandon," he announced. "We're all backing him. There's a place for every man here. I'll dig up the cash we need, Dozey can see that this right of way is put into shape, Luke can run the engine and Gabe Farrell can lay out the camps. We'll start tonight—"

A shot crashed out of the blackness, and Steve staggered. Doc Willetts jumped toward him.

"You hit, Steve?" he asked anxiously.

Steve shook his head. "Whistled past my ear," he said. Some of the men faced toward the darkness, muttering. "Let it ride!" Steve told them. "No use trying to find 'em in there. Somebody might get shot. Stay out of the light."

"We're gettin' out of here with Ol' Wheezer," Dozey declared. "Those of you who want to help lick this gang of killers, can stay. We'll be back with grub and an outfit; then we'll start in puttin' the Goose Track

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in shape. But first I've got a little chore to do!" He shoved Curvo up the gangway and into the engine cab ahead of him. Steve, Doc Willetts and a couple of others climbed aboard, too, but the remainder stayed. "We'll be back!" Dozey repeated to them. Then to Luke Price, he said: "All right! Let's go!"

Luke slid over the Johnson bar, eased out the throttle, and the sturdy little engine began backing away in the darkness.

"They'll take care of things at the end of steel," Dozey shouted to Steve over the clatter of the engine. "All we got to do is make sure the other crowd don't strike somewhere else along the line. It'll help us to find out who we're fightin'. That's where Curvo, here, is goin' to come in handy!"

Curvo, his face lighted by the flickering glare of the firebox, said nothing, but looked his scorn.

ONCE more they rolled slowly across the bridge, stopping where the trail to Dozey's cabin led down from the right of way.

"Here's where you get off!" Dozey told his prisoner.

"What you aim to do?" Curvo demanded uneasily.

"Goin' to see how tough you are," Dozey replied. "You don't look to me like the sort of man that can stand up to it!" He shoved Curvo ahead of him down the trail, and the others, wondering, followed. As they came to Dozey's cabin, the big dog appeared. It was an ominous shape in the gloom, but at a word from its master, quieted a little, although it kept moving on stiff legs around the men.

"Take a good look at him, Pard," Dozey ordered, indicating Curvo. "He ain't got sand in his craw, like Steve Brandon. He'll cave in—"

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"Hey!" cried Curvo in alarm. "What you figure on doin'?"

Dozey chuckled. "Just a little idea I had," he explained. "You won't talk, so I aim to loosen your tongue. First"—and he shoved Curvo into the cabin—"you're goin' to stay in there with no other weapon but your bare hands—and I'm send-in' Pard in there with you. All you got to do, Curvo, is to keep that dog off your neck! You do that, and we'll turn you loose. Hi, Pard! In there—and watch him!"

The dog moved menacingly through the doorway, growling.

Panic hit Curvo. "Wait!" he begged. "This ain't human, Peters! You can't do a thing like this! It's red Injun stuff!"

"It's worse than that," Dozey agreed. "Pard hates you. All he needs is a word from me. *Not yet, Pard!*" he added sharply, for the dog's growl rose to a threat. "Just watch him!"

"Hey!" cried Curvo. "Lemme out of here! I'll do anything you ask. I'll fight any six men, if I have to, but I won't face that devil of yours, Peters!"

"Then who put you up to that job tonight?" demanded Dozey sternly.

Curvo hesitated. Dozey stirred, and the dog rumbled warningly at Curvo.

"I . . . don't know," Curvo mumbled. "Dyke Morrow and a feller named Fallon, a newcomer to Stringtown, said they had a chore. Said there'd be good pay for me if I'd help. You grab Morrow and make *him* talk!"

"Why, you lyin' rat!" Dozey raged. "I'll make Pard tear you limb from—"

"Wait!" advised Steve. "Curvo can tell us more. Speak up, man! You never took a job for anybody without knowing what you're doing. Was Fengill behind this?"

"Not that I know of," Curvo answered. "You keep that cussed dog away, mister, and I'll tell you all I know. It was somebody in Stringtown. I never heard his name. But he wants to block the Goose Track. Our orders were to tear the thing up, twist the rails into knots—anything to wreck it!"

"Who shot Fengill?" demanded Steve. "We know it wasn't an accident. Where's Fengill now?"

"Told you all I know," Curvo protested. "Dyke Morrow might know what happened to Fengill, I wasn't there. Me, I don't know where Fengill is; maybe he's dead!"

Steve nodded to Dozey. "Let him go," he ordered, indicating Curvo. "He's no more use to us!"

"I'd be more in favor of lockin' him up until we finish this chore," Dozey muttered. "We're lettin' a snake go so he can bite us again!" Yet he spoke to the dog, and Pard came obediently from the cabin. "Get out!" Dozey ordered Curvo. "Next time I won't let anybody talk me into bein' soft with you!"

Curvo stumbled out of the door, and toward the dark woods. "Won't be any next time!" he flung over his shoulder as he vanished. Dozey grunted. Then all of them swung toward the right of way, where Luke Price stood guard over Ol' Wheezer. For suddenly the shrill whistle of the little engine cut the night suddenly in sharp, warning shrieks.

"Come on!" cried Steve, and led the way on the run.

CHAPTER XIII

SUSPICION

THEY found Luke Price in a state of excitement. "Down yonder!"—he pointed to the piers of the bridge over Sunrise Creek—"I saw

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a light—somebody must have struck a match. I sneaked up on the bridge and listened, and there was two-three fellers messin' around down there. I hustled back and blasted the whistle!"

"We'll take a look!" announced Steve. "Bring your clubs!" He went on down the embankment again, in the direction Luke Price had indicated. They searched through the brush lining the creek and growing rankly at the foot of the bridge supports, but the spot was deserted.

"Must have skedaddled when they heard Luke callin' us," Dozey announced. "No sign of anything. Hey!" He stumbled and fell over some object half hidden in the deep grass. "What's this?"

Steve struck a match and held it near. The thing that Dozey had fallen over was a box.

"Dynamite, by thunder!" Dozey exclaimed. "Nearly a case of it. Caps, too. Enough powder there to blow this bridge to thunder and gone!"

"Well," announced Steve, "guess that settles it for us. We'll need guards every foot of this right of way, day and night. Dozey, you've got a gun. You watch the bridge and this stretch of track. We'll drop others off between here and Stringtown. Doc and I will go back with Luke on Ol' Wheezer and get more help—guns and whatever else we need. Dozey, cache this powder where you can watch it. That stuff may come in handy later. Tomorrow we'll tackle the job. If this night's work isn't enough to put honest people in Stringtown behind us, then the town deserves to die!"

Soon they were once more rolling back toward the logging settlement—Steve and Doc Willetts aboard the engine, with a couple of men Brandon had decided to drop on the line between Sunrise Creek and Stringtown. It was near daylight when Ol' Wheezer arrived noisily at the shed where it was housed. But for Steve Brandon it seemed that something had been accomplished, the groundwork laid. The plan was beginning to take form, and he had the feeling that his suspicions of who was the key to the puzzle were strengthening. As yet he couldn't be sure of the motive, although it was plain why Jud Forsythe would wish to see him fail, even as Jim Brandon had failed. Still there were other elements which entered into the picture.

"You come home with me," Doc Willetts told Steve. "You need sleep, for one thing. Second, you got no place to stay!"

"I've got a place," Steve replied, "although I don't want to sleep. We'll make a showing today. I'm depending on you, doc, to round up what cash we need. We can work on a shoestring, maybe, but not on hot air. We'll need machinery."

"What kind?" Willetts asked.

"A cherry picker, for one thing," Steve replied. "A derrick that will not only put our steel and timbers in place—because we're likely to have to do some bridge building—but which will also load Forsythe's logs. I'll have Gabe Farrell rig a spar tree at the edge of the Thunderbird tract, when we're ready for it. We need tackle—a bull block and lines and a steam donkey. There's got to be money, too, for grub and supplies. You figure we can produce all this stuff?"

Doc Willetts wagged his head. "I'm into this up to my ears," he declared, repeating what he had said earlier that night. "No time to back out now. I'll see you through, Steve. Somehow I figure that you

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know what you're doing. Daylight in the swamp, hey?"

STEVE grinned at him. "In more ways than one," he assured the other. "I'm trying not to make the same mistake that Jim made!" Yet back in the gloomy room which his brother had occupied, Steve didn't feel so confident. He felt that he had the thing rolling, he had loyal men back of him, and they knew what to do. Dozey to oversee the building up of the Goose Track, Gabe Farrell out yonder at the end of steel, repairing the damage that was done, men strung along the right of way from Stringtown to the end of the railroad, Doc Willetts turning his peculiar talents to advantage—all these were on the side of Steve Brandon, who had returned home from oblivion, expecting brief respite that would let him be swallowed up in the outside world once more, but who now found himself leading a cause.

On the other side he saw Bekan and Tidewater, powerful adversaries, no doubt; he saw Jud Forsythe, grasping and ruthless. Matt Kenovan had a part in it; Molly Kenovan, too. And Lud Craven—where did he fit in? Alive or dead, there was Joe Fengill, to say nothing of his gang. All these must be considered.

Nevertheless, Steve pushed them from his mind as, in the gray morning light, he seated himself once more at the desk which Jim Brandon had used, and where Jim had died. For no reason that he could have given, save curiosity, Steve took from his inner pocket the unfinished letter which he had found among his brother's effects. He pored over it again, every word and line, trying to fathom the mystery which it suggested. The bloodstains at the lower corner were a poignant reminder of the tragic circumstances surrounding the moment which had marked its writing. Steve sat there pondering the thing, and found himself batting his eyes when the elusive answer to the problem persisted in evading him. His eyelids became heavier and, although the rising sun shot its first rays through the dingy window, he slept at last. No sooner had slumber taken him, than he dreamed.

It was a mixed-up sort of dream, in which Jim, Molly Kenovan and Lud Craven all were involved, and although Steve and Jim seemed to be battling over something, Jim was trying to tell his brother that everything was all right at last. Yet all the time Steve seemed to be guarding against Lud Craven, who acted smiling and friendly but was constantly sneaking up from behind; and then Steve saw the terrified face of Molly Kenovan, and she was screaming: "Look out, Steve!" He flung himself aside, and there was a resounding crash; and then he found himself on the floor. He sat up, realizing that he had fallen out of his chair. Feeling foolish, he got to his feet, and presently there were running footsteps outside the door. The panel was flung open, and a man stood there. Steve recognized him as Duncan, the man who ran the store below.

Duncan seemed astonished at sight of Steve. "What happened?" he demanded. "I was just openin' the store down there when I heard the crash!"

Steve shrugged and grinned wryly. "I sat down here to think things over and must have gone to sleep and fallen out of my chair," he explained. "Nothing more serious than that."

The storekeeper looked uncon-

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vinced. "Didn't sound like a fallin' chair to me," he declared. "More like a gunshot!" He looked at Steve oddly. "You know," he went on, "it sounded just like it did when your brother—" He left the sentence unfinished, and sniffed the air. "Danged if it doesn't seem like I smell burned gunpowder, too!" He eyed Steve oddly again. "You sure everything is all right?" he persisted.

Steve nodded his head but he realized Duncan was right. There *was* the acrid taint of burned powder in the air. As Duncan went out, shrugging in puzzlement, Steve stared around the place. The window was closed as before. Nobody had entered the door before Duncan had appeared. No gunshot could have been fired in the room, and yet Steve's eyes fell on a splintered hole in the wooden baseboard on the side of the room beyond where he had sat. He took out his knife and dug at the hole, and a heavy bullet dropped out, flattened through impact with the plaster behind the baseboard. Steve held the thing in his hand, staring at it. Maybe the bullet was part of the grim story behind Jim Brandon's death, and yet the hole in the wood looked too fresh for that. What else could it be? Could somebody have fired a shot at Steve while he slept? If so, from where? And, lastly, *who* could have done it? The whole thing seemed so fantastic that Steve was half convinced it was still a part of his dream.

THERE were more footsteps outside, and Steve sat there in tense expectancy. The door opened and a man he had never seen stood there, a middle-aged man with a brisk manner.

"Your name Brandon?" the newcomer asked. And when Steve nod-

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ded, the man said: "I'm Hazen. Of the Transcontinental. Seems like you and I ought to talk things over!"

"About the new spur?" Steve asked. "I'm not sure I'm interested in that now. My first chore is to build a logging railroad!"

Hazen smiled. "Maybe I can help you with that job," he offered. "We're interested in seeing you build it. We'd rather come here than go to Tidewater's terminal at Harper."

"If I fix up the Goose Track," Steve replied, "it will be because I want to help Stringtown. Hauling Forsythe's logs and turning 'em over to the Transcontinental would kill this place, because it would shut down the mill!"

Hazen shook his head negatively. "Not necessarily," he declared. "Maybe we'd rather haul finished lumber than rough logs. The freight rate on lumber is higher and that means more money for us!"

"You mean that?" Steve asked curiously. It didn't seem to fit in with what he'd seen so far. But if it was true, it simplified the situation so far as Molly Kenovan and her father were concerned. Matt Kenovan would be an ally, if he could get a chance to turn the Thunderbird logs into lumber.

"All you've got to do is to show us that you mean business," Hazen assured him. "Might be Forsythe will contract with Kenovan to cut the logs. If he does we'll make him a rate for the finished lumber. It will be watertight, then. All you have to do is to finish the Goose Track!"

As Hazen explained it, it looked absurdly simple to Steve Brandon. The only thing queer about it was that Hazen had evolved the idea himself. Steve remembered that Hazen had been talking with Lud Craven the previous day. Was Craven behind this? Well, it didn't matter, so long as it wasn't a trick. All Steve had to do was finish the Goose Track. That was going to be no easy job in itself.

"Well," Steve told Hazen, "that changes things a lot. If I can get Forsythe to put in with me, I'll do all I can to get the Transcontinental spur here. I'll see that Stringtown backs it. I'll—" He broke off, then, as he looked past Hazen, his attention distracted by something he saw on the wall.

It was nothing more significant than a round piece of tin covering a hole where a stovepipe at one time had entered the wall. It had been painted over and made to fit tightly, but Steve noted that it sagged a little, revealing a dark hole in the wall behind. Hazen's attention followed him, but the man evidently could not make out what Steve was thinking.

"You get hold of Forsythe, then," Hazen went on. "Let me know when you've got things fixed up." He left, and again Steve was alone.

Stepping over to the wall, Steve pried the disk away. The dark stovepipe hole was revealed, but in the back of it, where a brick had been removed, was another hole which ran clear through the wall. Sniffing at the place, Steve found the burned-powder smell stronger than ever. And the meaning of it came to him at once.

There *had* been a shot fired at him while he slept! By some freak chance he had slid out of his chair at the opportune moment, and the gunman had missed, although thinking, no doubt, that the bullet had struck its mark. The gunman was somebody who had stood on a chair or desk in that other room and held a rifle or pistol muzzle against that

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hole in the wall. Yet who could have been there? Steve stepped quickly outside and discovered the room led off from the same hall. The door leading to it was half open, and he flung back the panel. But the place was empty, although there was a packing box pushed against the wall opposite where the hole came through the wall.

Steve hesitated only a moment, then went downstairs to the store. Finding Duncan, he asked: "That room next to mine upstairs—anybody been using it lately?"

The storekeeper eyed him curiously for a moment. "Why, no," he replied finally. "Nobody's used that place for quite a spell. Used to belong to Eb Trent!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE START

ASTONISHMENT left Steve blank for a moment. Eb Trent? But Trent was dead. Surely he had had nothing to do with the shot that had been fired at Brandon.

"Eb Trent," the storekeeper went on, "had his office there. Keeled over in there one day. What made you ask that question, Brandon?"

"Nothing important," Steve answered evasively. "Just an idea in the back of my head. But tell me this: When you came up to my place a spell ago, when you heard what was like a gunshot, did you see anybody coming out of Trent's room?"

Duncan shook his head vehemently. "Course not!" he said. "Why should anybody be comin' out of there? I told you the place is unused. Look, Brandon, what in tarnation you tryin' to get at, anyway? Sounds mighty mysterious to me!"

Steve didn't have to answer that question, for he saw Doc Willetts coming into the store.

The physician looked brisk and important. "Well," he announced, "we're ready to start. I've lined up the stuff you asked for; we can move it out on the line any time you're ready!"

Steve nodded. Taking Willetts by the arm, he led him into the street. He knew that he had stirred Duncan's curiosity and he didn't want to answer any more questions.

"Doc," he queried, "have you got any idea who it could have been that Eb Trent was working for when he tried to buy the Goose Track from me?"

Willetts stared at him for an instant. "Can't say that I have," he answered. "Anyway, what's that got to do with the job? It's still plenty early, but the boys are stirring. Figure you'll have nigh onto a hundred men helping you. What's more, they're taking a chance. They know they'll never be paid unless you make good—"

"One more thing," interrupted Steve, as though he had not heard. "You say when you found Jim dead, he'd been shot through the heart. There'd have been powder burns if he'd done it himself, wouldn't there?"

"I found powder burns," declared Willetts irritably. "Look, Steve, you try to mix up suspicions about what happened to Jim, with this job you've got on hand, and you'll fail. You can't ride two horses at once! These things don't tie together!"

"The devil of it is," Steve retorted, "I think they do!"

"What nonsense is this?" demanded Doc Willetts. Steve told him what had happened. He added what Clem Fears had said about the missing diary.

"Why," protested Willetts finally,

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"it's the dangedest thing I ever heard!" He was thinking rapidly. "I was there in Clem's jail office the day it happened," he went on. "Lots of folks drifted in and out. But I remember Clem was always there, at least so far as I know. If he had that book, which I never knew for certain, until you told me, he wouldn't have left it lying around. He'd have put it away. Unless he showed it around, how would anybody know what was in it? I read the danged thing myself, but I don't remember much of what it said. Nothing important, far as I could make out. Still, I've got an idea of my own. You leave this to me—and get on the job of fixing up the Goose Track!"

"This Eb Trent," Steve went on. "Who was he? I never knew him when I was in Stringtown. Who were his friends?"

DOC WILLETTS shot a quizzical glance at him. "You mean who'd be likely to know about that hole in the wall?" he asked. "Well, that may be a hunch, at that. Still, it doesn't make sense. Because the closest friend Eb Trent had was Matt Kenovan!"

Steve swung around on him sharply. "You sure of that?" he demanded.

"Certainly," was the reply. "Whenever Matt Kenovan wasn't at his mill, you'd likely find him at Eb Trent's office. That's why your hunch doesn't make sense. Matt Kenovan isn't the kind of man who would have murdered your brother—admitting, of course, that Jim didn't kill himself. He wouldn't take a shot at you, either. That's why it doesn't make sense, I say!"

"But it does!" Steve insisted. "It makes a lot of sense!"

"You gone crazy?" demanded Willetts. "Why, I'll tell you this much, Steve: Molly Kenovan is doing all she can to straighten this thing out. She's fixed things with Hazen, of the Transcontinental. If she hadn't, he'd have gone to Harper, because he figures that you can't make it!"

Steve thought somewhat bitterly that he could have guessed as much. Hazen would never have come to him with that proposition unless the Transcontinental man had been worked on. They figured Steve Brandon couldn't cut it alone; they had to help him.

"Kenovan or not," Steve insisted, "it still makes sense!" And then they saw Clem Fears coming toward them.

The marshal grinned. "Got that cell all cleaned out for you, Steve," he announced almost jovially. "I figure it won't be long now. Seems like you're gettin' in folks' hair. There's a clamor going on about why you're runnin' loose without so much as a nickel's worth of bond to prevent you from runnin' away!"

"Look," Doc Willetts said angrily, "when this blows over, it's likely there'll be somebody else wearing that tin star you've got on your coat! We'll be out of your jurisdiction—outside of Stringtown—and if you start any foolishness, we'll brush you aside!"

"You stick to your pills and poultices, like I'm always telling you, Doc Willetts," retorted Fears. "I don't aim to crowd Steve Brandon, unless I have to do my duty. Fact is, I've got somethin' to tell him. He was askin' about that diary of Jim's. I remember now I stuck it in my office desk after showin' it to a few folks who I thought might be interested."

"Who were they?" asked Steve.

"Just four of 'em," Fears replied.

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"Molly Kenovan, her dad, Lud Craven and Jud Forsythe. Far as I know, nobody else in this town knew what was in the thing. That's all I can remember. Some outsider must have picked it up. Can't figure who it was, though. Folks came and went."

"Have you had anybody in that cell you've reserved for me?" Steve asked.

"Why," replied Fears, "now that you mention it, I did. I had Joe Fengill in there. He'd got a little high down at Dobie's place, and I put him away to sober him up!"

Joe Fengill! But what, Steve asked himself, would make Fengill interest himself in a diary written by Jim Brandon? And how could Fengill have obtained the book if he had been in a cell? The questions seemed more unanswerable than ever. Nor were they answered in Steve Brandon's mind at midday, when he found himself out on the Goose Track at last.

THINGS were moving. Doc Willetts had made good his word. Dozey Peters had recruited a crew of Stringtowners, and they were strung out along the right of way, busily engaged with pick and shovel in putting the roadbed in shape. Tools and other equipment for the men had been hauled out on Luke Price's doughty little engine, which seemed eager to be of service at last. Vegetation which had sprung up between the rails was being cleared away, rotted ties were being replaced, rails were being lined up. Up and down the line on Ol' Wheezer fluttered Dozey Peters, seemingly in many places at once. Out at the end of the line, so Steve learned, Gabe Farrell had already put up a camp. The workers along the stretch of railroad not only were busily engaged in putting the thing

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in shape, but they were guarding it as well. Some men were even detailed as patrols. It looked like an airtight arrangement. At the rate they were going, they would be done well within the thirty-day limit set by Jud Forsythe in his contract.

But Steve knew that the opposition was far from finished. There were many angles which he could not understand, and one of them was what had become of Joe Fengill. Since the battle out at the end of the line, neither Curvo nor the rest of the gang had been seen. Bekan had vanished, too. Not since the previous day had Steve seen anything of Matt Kenovan or Molly. The only thing he desired of any of them at the moment was to get hold of Jud Forsythe and pledge the man to let Matt Kenovan cut the Thunderbird logs. Once that was accomplished, Steve felt that he could face Molly and tell her that he was not carrying on the feud against her father. It seemed to him that there was no good reason why Jud Forsythe wouldn't agree. If the man wanted to see Stringtown die, then it was best that his attitude be discovered now. Steve was supervising the cutting of timbers which would be used for constructing car bunks for a "galloping goose," when he saw Lud Craven coming from the direction of Stringtown.

Craven came up and nodded in friendly fashion. "Well, Steve," he said affably, "it looks like I was wrong, after all. You've made a fine start, and you'll likely go through with it. I hear, too, that you may swing Forsythe into line, so that the Kenovan mill gets a chance to cut the Thunderbird logs. That'll mean a lot for all of us. I just wanted you to know that Matt and I are ready to help any way we can."

He and Steve stood apart from the others, who were cutting the heavy poles into the desired length for the logging car. "That's fine," Steve assured him. "You don't sound like you did the last time we talked."

"A man can make mistakes," Craven replied. He looked up and down the right of way, appraising the work that had been done. "Had quite a talk with that Transcontinental man," Craven went on. "He wanted to put his spur over to Harper, but I convinced him that the Tidewater outfit wouldn't have a chance at the Thunderbird logs. When you going to fix things with Jud Forsythe?"

"When I can find him," Steve answered. "He seems to have disappeared." This was true, Steve had made inquiries here and there. For some reason of his own, Forsythe had vanished.

"Well," said Craven easily, "I think you can handle him." He smiled to himself, as though at a sudden thought.

Suddenly Steve's attention was distracted by a man hurrying up the track from the outer end of the line. He saw that it was Benson, the man who had figured in that first clash out yonder.

"Brandon!" Benson called when he got nearer. "There's something queer going on that Dozey Peters wants to see you about. Sunrise Creek has gone haywire!"

"What you mean?" Steve demanded sharply.

"Dozey has been gettin' his drinkin' water from it ever since he built his shack on the other side of the gulch," Benson answered. "Says it's been a strong-flowin' stream all summer. But the danged thing seems to be dryin' up now!"

Steve shrugged in relief. "Well, what's there to get excited about in

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that?" he wanted to know. "We've had a dry spell."

Benson shook his head, eying Lud Craven for a brief but potent instant. "Dozey says," he announced, "that he wants to see you right away!"

Craven grinned at Steve again. "Well," he declared, "I'll be hitting back toward town. Just wanted to see how you're making out, Steve. I'll tell Matt Kenovan. And if I see Forsythe, I'll get word to you!" He turned and swung away down the track in the direction he had come.

"Quick, Benson!" commanded Steve, turning to the other man. "What's up?"

"Just what I said," Benson replied. "Dozey has an idea, and he's gettin' busy on it. But he wanted you to know." He stared after the vanishing Craven. "I don't trust that feller," he announced. "Too slick and oily. Nobody in Stringtown likes him, either. If he comes out on top in this, there'll be plenty who'll wish they'd seen it turn out the other way. You coming?"

But Steve was already striding off down the track, in the direction of Sunrise Creek bridge. What Benson had said wasn't fully understandable, and yet Steve had vast confidence in Dozey Peters; if the latter was worried, then there must be good reason for it. Steve and Benson came at last to the bridge, where Dozey's crew stood about staring down into the gulch. Steve took a look and saw that the bed of Sunrise Creek was virtually dry.

"Where's Dozey?" he demanded.

"Gone upstream," someone answered. "Tryin' to figure out what this means, if anything. That was a good, strong stream this morning. Doesn't make sense that she could have dried up this quick!"

"Hey!" yelled Steve suddenly, as realization dawned. "Down in the gulch, everybody! Get everything clear of the bridge that we can!" Without understanding, they hurried to obey, but even as they did so, Steve knew that it was probably too late. From a point far up in the hills came a thumping sound which made the ground quake.

CHAPTER XV

ACTION

STEVE had sensed at once the fear that was in Dozey Peters' mind, the same fear which perhaps the others felt, for they were woodswise men, but which they had not voiced. It was hardly possible that a stream like Sunrise Creek should have vanished so unaccountably. Dozey Peters had at once set off to learn the reason for it. Steve knew that reason as soon as he saw what had happened to Sunrise Creek; he had suspected it even when Benson had broken the news to him.

A dam of some sort, either created accidentally by the collapse of rotted trees which had blocked the watercourse or, what was more likely, a deliberate, man-made jam, had occurred upstream. That was why Sunrise Creek had vanished. The waters of the hurrying, full-flowing stream were backed up behind that jam, and when they gave way suddenly, they would come hurrying down the gorge and probably take out the railroad trestle. That thudding noise meant but one thing to Steve, that the dam had been dynamited, probably by the same gang which, the previous night, had attempted to blow out the bridge, but had failed, due to the vigilance of Luke Price. They dared not try to repeat their effort, because the bridge was now guarded; yet they could

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make the force of water do their work. Dozey was up there, somewhere, and what had happened to him there was no way of knowing. It didn't matter just now; nothing mattered, in fact, save that the bridge must be kept from going out.

Never had Steve Brandon faced a situation like this before. If he could supply the answer; it would take some of the quickest thinking he had ever done in his life. On the heels of his orders to the crew he went down in the canyon among them.

"Clear that truck from the foot of the bridge supports!" he told his men. "We'll have water here soon, more than we can handle. If we get another jam against the bridge timbers, she'll take everything out in a hurry!"

Realizing what he meant, the men began hustling to get the accumulation of brush and driftwood away from the bridge footings so that when the water came it would have an easier flow without piling up behind the structure. They worked hard and fast, not knowing what moment the water would arrive, and possibly trap them. While one gang tackled the job, Steve had laid out, he led another to a point a hundred yards upstream where a huge boulder jutted from the stream bed.

It was a wild decision he had made, but he reached it quickly, for there was not time to consider all the angles. What he wanted was to check the full sweep of the water down the center of the stream beneath the bridge, where the base of one timbered support was located on a low pier in the dry creek bed. That support would be the first to go if the water struck it with full force, and when it went the bridge would collapse. Showing the men by example what he wanted, Steve began piling such driftwood as he could carry in a sloping, V-shaped mass on either side of the boulder. All hands worked furiously, while the speeding seconds raced on, and from up the head of the gully they heard presently an ominous whispering which deepened into a sullen roar. Around a bend in the stream they glimpsed a tumbling, heaving mass of muddy water and driftwood that rolled over and over as it sped downstream. Steve's yell of warning was not needed, for the men saw the oncoming flood, and scurried for higher ground. Steve himself barely gained a point halfway up the steep bank when the freshet struck.

IT hit with the impact of thunder, hesitated in fury at the obstruction which Steve and his gang had created at the boulder. Some of its driftwood caught and held against that already put in place by the men, and the rushing water slid off each side and went feathering into the bank before spilling into the stream bed again. It lasted only seconds, and then the flood was sinking as rapidly as it had come. But the center pier of the span had been spared, and with it the bridge. The men yelled in triumph, and then somebody asked: "Where's Dozey Peters?"

In the excitement of the moment Dozey had been forgotten; but now they remembered he had gone upstream to discover the reason why Sunrise Creek had gone dry. They had heard that muffled blast yonder, and they knew what it meant. Sunrise Creek had been dammed upstream, then the dam blown out by dynamite, in the hope that the flood would take out the bridge.

"Hi, Steve!" one of the men called to Brandon, as he stood there on the river bank, watching the cur-

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rent swirling by and dropping to its normal stage. "That gang can't be far away. Maybe we can nab 'em before they can get clear. We'll hang every last one of the polecats!"

But Steve already had the same thought, and he swung away from the creek and started along the top of the bank, the others following. Excitement had brought other men from the crews working along the Goose Track; there was no danger in leaving the bridge now, because others would be there to guard it. What Steve wanted was to learn what had happened to Dozey Peters. He went plowing through the brush, reckless of what lay ahead, and the rest tried to keep up with him. For perhaps half a mile Steve went on, and then he came to the scene of the dynamiting.

A glance made clear to him what had happened. Sunrise Creek funneled into a narrow gorge of rock at this point, and its way had been blocked by means of rotted logs, old stumps, brush, debris of all kinds which had been dumped hastily into the canyon. The bigger stuff had become wedged between the rock walls, and the rest had massed behind it. Quickly the water had risen, and then had gone out with a rush when the dam was blasted.

"Dozey! Dozey!" Steve called loudly, but there was no answer.

He could hear the others smashing their way through the brush behind him, and he went down the bank and into the gorge. He figured that it was likely Dozey had gone that way, if he had hoped to head off the explosion. Dozey might still be there, or he might have been swept downstream when the dam had gone out. It was treacherous going down there, for the rocks were wet and slippery, and sometimes he had to wade when the overhang was too steep for him to stay on shore. He called again, and his voice went echoing up the canyon. And then from above a sliver of rock came rattling down and splashed into the water.

Steve stopped and looked upward. He figured it was unlikely that the rock could have been loosened of its own accord; somebody must be up there. But he couldn't see from where he stood, and he took a few more steps, still peering above. He was in the act of rounding a rocky point when Molly Kenovan's voice echoed through the gorge.

"Steve!" she called sharply. "Go back! Go back, Steve!"

He stopped, trying to make out where she was. He saw nothing alarming ahead; perhaps an eighth of a mile away the canyon widened and flattened out. Nobody was in sight there. He took another step, and something curved off the edge of the overhang and shot downward, something that looked like a short and grayish-yellow stick, with a smoking tail. Steve turned to run and the hot, flashing roar of the blast caught him from behind, flattening him, hammering consciousness out of him.

HIS senses came back to him with increasing sound which began as a faint buzzing, and grew to a stifled, pent-up noise that was like distant thunder. Instinctively he rolled over and tried to get up, but a hand pushed him back gently. Out of somewhere nearby came Molly's voice: "You mustn't move, Steve! They think you're dead!" He opened his eyes and saw her bending over him. Behind her and all around were the rock walls of the canyon. The muffled thunder he

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had heard was, he realized, the echoes of Sunrise Creek as it tumbled through the gorge.

"They may still be watching," the girl went on hurriedly. "Keep quiet until I'm sure they've gone!"

Steve obeyed, while his senses cleared. He stared at her curiously, doubtfully. "Who's watching?" he demanded at last. "Who was it threw that stick of powder?" And then came recollection of the other things that had happened—the flood and the attempt to wash out the bridge. "What are *you* doing here?" he demanded suspiciously. "You must have known about the plans to wipe out the bridge!"

"Quiet!" Molly said sharply, looking around. She stood up and scanned the edge of the cliff. "Maybe you can make it now, if you hurry," she went on. "They've gone, but they may be coming down here to make sure that you're dead. Get up!" She stooped and helped him to his feet. "Up the canyon," she commanded. "We can get out that way, and maybe cut around to the Goose Track!"

Steve still felt dizzy. It might have been from the fumes of exploded dynamite, and yet there was a lump on his right temple, probably caused by being blasted face downward on the rocky stream bed. Yet in the midst of his mental haze one realization stood out: Molly Kenovan was involved with the gang which had built the dam and then blasted it. Otherwise why should she be here? Yet at the moment she seemed to be trying to help Steve get clear. Probably she had already saved his life.

"Hurry!" she ordered impatiently. "We've got to get out of this place and into the woods before they find that we're gone!"

"Where's Dozey Peters?" Steve demanded thickly. "You killed him?"

The girl shot a startled look at Steve. "Dozey Peters?" she repeated. "I never saw him. Wait!" she urged. "There's somebody at the top of the bank!"

Looking up, Steve saw Matt Kenovan standing there, a rifle in his hands.

CHAPTER XVI

THE DICKER

STEVE knew that there was no use in trying to get away; he was out in the open, and Matt Kenovan was eying him closely.

"It's dad!" exclaimed Molly. "We'll make it now!" She waved a hand at her father, and started up the bank toward him, Steve following dubiously.

"You were gone so long," Molly reproached her father. "I didn't know what had happened." Briefly she told what had taken place in the canyon.

Matt Kenovan nodded. "They've likely pulled out," he declared at last. "You all right, Brandon?"

Steve, a little astonished, nodded. Then his manner became grim. "I don't understand this play," he declared. "There was a gang that tried to wipe out the bridge, but the plan misfired. Now I find Molly and you—"

"If you're hinting that we had any part in it," Kenovan broke in, "you're crazy! We tried to head it off, but were too late. We got wind of it in Stringtown and hustled out as fast as we could. We got here right after the dam was blown. A while later Molly saw you down in the canyon, saw the gang getting

Continued on page 118

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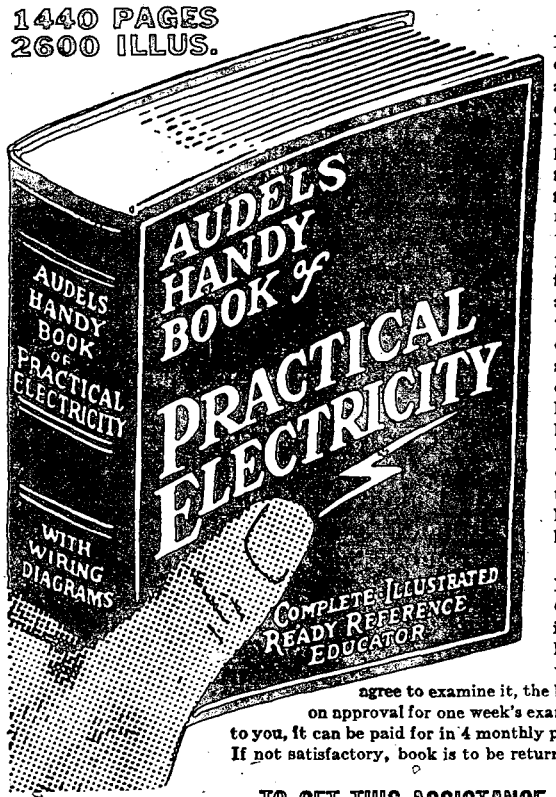

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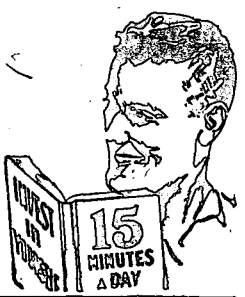

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Continued from page 116

ready to blast you. She did what she could!"

"You mean," demanded Steve, "that you're with me in this job?"

"Why not?" Kenovan asked impatiently. "If you put it over, it means that I can keep the mill running, and pull out of the hole this pay-roll robbery put me into. Providing, of course, that we can get Jud Forsythe to give me a chance to turn his logs into lumber. He'll do that, because he's always been a friend of mine!" Kenovan tried to make it sound confident, yet Steve caught the note of uncertainty in the man's voice. "Trouble is, I haven't been able to find him. Looks like he's vanished into thin air!"

"We'll find him, dad," said Molly reassuringly. "It's going to turn out all right!"

There were several things that Steve wanted to know, but one was vastly more important than the others. He saw the men who had followed him from the Goose Track, coming along the lip of the gorge. Probably they hadn't seen the attempt on his life down there, although naturally they must have heard the blast.

"Dozey Peters came up here to look into this," Steve told Kenovan. "But there's no sign of him. You know who was in that gang?" he went on somewhat suspiciously. "How did you find out the job was planned in Stringtown?"

Kenovan stared at him a moment. "I never saw Peters," he declared. "Only saw one of the gang—they were too far away—that I recognized. That was Ike Tandy. As to how we found out, well, it doesn't make any difference now. If you knew, you'd likely jump to the wrong conclusion. Molly and I want to work it out ourselves!"

Steve made no reply to that. His brain was still whirling from that ordeal in the canyon. He waited until the rest of his men had come up. They had seen nothing of Dozey Peters.

"Maybe," Benson suggested. "Dozey's back at the railroad. You want us to start huntin' for these skunks?"

Steve shook his head. "We'll need guns," he told them. "This is no job for fists and clubs. I'll send Price back to Stringtown; with the engine. Kenovan, you can do this much. Lend us that rifle you're carrying; then see that Price brings out the guns we need. You can pass the word to Clem Fears to pick up Ike Tandy if he shows himself in Stringtown. Maybe he'll talk when he hears you recognized him."

KENOVAN hesitated a moment, then handed over the gun. "I'll do my part," he agreed, "although I don't favor gunplay. I brought that gun along only for protection." He looked at Molly briefly, and then followed the others back toward the railroad.

Dozey Peters wasn't there; nobody had seen him since he vanished into the brush to find out what had happened to Sunrise Creek. Matt Kenovan and Molly climbed in the cab of Ol' Wheezer, with Luke Price. Steve gave Price the order about the guns, and then the engine backed noisily down the track.

Steve worked the lever of Kenovan's rifle, saw that it was loaded and that there were cartridges in the magazine. He took from his shirt pocket the bullet he had dug out of the baseboard in Jim's office. The bullet was a .38-40 and Kenovan's rifle was the same caliber; but

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that didn't necessarily mean anything because there were probably many such old-fashioned guns in these hills. Yet he knew that he had a question to ask Doc Willetts; he wanted to know what manner of gun it was that had killed Jim Brandon.

Members of the crew were paying no attention to what Steve was doing; they were concerned now with the job. There might be a man hunt coming up later, but the immediate chore was to get the Goose Track finished. As for Steve himself, although he felt bewildered and doubtful, he didn't want to jump to any hasty conclusions.

The job itself was moving along. Before he left, Dozey Peters had laid out the work of putting the right of way in shape, and the thing was taking form. No longer did it look like the streak of rust in deep grass that it had appeared when Steve first saw it. The steel was being lined up, the gravel shoulders straightened and smoothed; soon it would be ready to take out Jud Forsythe's logs. Which reminded Steve that he had to fix things with Forsythe, as Hazen had suggested; but Forsythe, according to Matt Kenovan, had disappeared. Dozey Peters was gone, too; and even Joe Fengill had vanished. There was a purpose behind all this, a directing hand which made its moves with a subtle touch which could not be readily fathomed. Steve Brandon, standing there with Kenovan's gun cradled in his arm, straightened suddenly as inspiration came to him. There *was* a way he could crack the mystery and, maybe after that, the rest of it would clear up!

He took a look at the sky. A couple hours of daylight left. If Price got what he was after, he would be back before long. But Steve knew that the matter couldn't wait. He turned to Benson.

"I've got an idea how I can find Dozey," he said. "And if I find him, I'll find something more. When Luke gets back, all I want is to keep this line guarded. I'm going on this hunt alone!"

"Where'll you look?" Benson asked curiously. "You'll likely be up against four-five men at least. We figured on taking the whole bunch out in the search—"

"Likely that's what the other side wants us to do," interrupted Steve. "My hunch is so simple that it may work. You keep things rolling until I get back!" He turned and went down the right of way and into the gulch of Sunrise Creek, following the trail he had taken that time he had first encountered Dozey Peters. Soon he was walking along the path which led to Dozey's cabin, scanning the ground. But he saw no fresh sign there. Only when the cabin showed through the trees before him did he stop and study it. No smoke came from its chimney; the place was probably just as Dozey had left it. He went on again, noisily now, and finally he broke into a cheerful whistling, yet all the while he kept the gun ready. Knowing what to expect, he looked this way and that; yet when it happened it was so startling that he flinched.

FROM nowhere it seemed Dozey Peters' big dog suddenly appeared; it seemed to materialize in the trail a few paces ahead of Steve as though from thin air. It uttered no sound, no warning, but stood there impassively, eying Steve, nostrils twitching as it sought to identify him.

Steve stopped and said encourag-

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ingly: "Come here, Pard!" He knew that the dog must remember him, but whether Pard would remember that Dozey had accepted Steve as a friend, was another matter. "Come here, Pard!" Steve repeated confidently. The dog hesitated a moment longer, then took a step forward and stopped once more. Steve made a clucking sound as he turned and started back along the trail. He went a few steps and stopped again. He slapped his hand against his leg. "Come here!" he said sharply.

This time Pard obeyed. He was confused, but his canine mind seemed to grasp the fact that Steve intended no harm. Steve swung again, and out of the tail of his eye he saw that the dog was trotting obediently at his heels. Steve felt like smiling in triumph. So far his plan had worked, though the real test of it was still to come.

Upstream lay the canyon where Dozey Peters had gone. Steve held steadily that way, encouraging Pard now and then, but the dog seemed willing enough. In fact, he appeared to be taking a lively interest in things. He dropped his nose to the ground, sniffing, and then in growing eagerness, he moved ahead of the man. Steve knew what that meant. Pard had caught the faintest suggestion of his master's scent; Dozey Peters had passed this way recently.

Now Steve had to hustle to keep up and he tried to move without making more sound than was necessary. He told himself that he hardly dared hope as yet, and still the thing seemed to be working out. Presently the dog stopped and explored the ground again, and Steve saw that his hackles had risen. Steve likewise looked the ground over carefully but, aside from seeing that it was trampled and broken, he could make out nothing significant. Yet the dog's nose told the story perfectly, Steve realized; Dozey Peters had been here, and so had strangers whom Pard hated. Then the dog went on again, more eagerly than ever.

Now Pard held steadily to one direction. This, Steve realized at last, paralleled the route of the Goose Track and led away into the wilds, toward Jud Forsythe's land. Now and then Pard was temporarily puzzled as the trail came to creeks, but he forded these and promptly picked up the scent on the other side. For another couple of miles they went on, and Steve saw that the timber had grown bigger, the underbrush thinning out as it does where shade is deep beneath great trees. This, he guessed, must be the Thunderbird tract. It made him think of Jud Forsythe, and yet he could not see that Dozey Peters' disappearance had anything to do with the timberman; the gang trying to wreck the Goose Track would likely have a hangout up in these hills, and the tract, a virgin wilderness, would be an ideal spot. Steve went on more warily, though he was forced to walk swiftly in order to keep up with the dog.

In the depths of the forest, under the tall trees, night was coming swiftly, yet Steve determined that he would keep following the dog so long as Pard could hold the trail. The land seemed now to pitch downward a little, and Steve realized that he had crossed a low divide which separated the logging railroad from the natural slope toward the sea. This seemed to him to be making more and more sense. Surely the Tidewater outfit was behind these attacks and the dog was leading him

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in the general direction of the site called Harper where the rival for Forsythe's timber was located.

At last Pard stopped, sniffed at the gloom ahead; and Steve, peering from behind a clump of brush, saw a house.

Rather it was a cabin, new-appearing and fairly large. Smoke climbed from its chimney. Steve saw a man come out of the place, stand there and look around, then go back in. The dog rumbled, then quieted at a low warning from Steve. But he himself was excited, for he knew that the end of the hunt was in sight. Dozey Peters was down there.

STEVE had not recognized the man who had appeared and then gone back in the cabin, but there had seemed to be something vaguely familiar about him. Steve kept his vantage point and spoke again to the dog. Pard obediently lay down; Dozey had trained him well. The dog seemed to understand what lay in Steve's mind—they were going to watch and wait until dark. It would be folly for Steve to approach while he could be seen at a distance; if Dozey was a captive there, undoubtedly somebody was on the lookout. Besides, Steve had the desire to see what would develop, for this was the first time he'd had the opportunity to come so close to his enemies without being observed, and there were things he wanted to learn. He stood there patiently, and darkness settled over the deep woods. A light appeared in the single window which faced him, but still he waited. Once he heard a thudding sound down at the cabin, as though somebody was wielding an ax. Several

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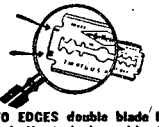

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times, Pard whined uneasily, not liking the delay, but he did not attempt to leave. It was nearly an hour after Steve had arrived, and night lay thickly in the forest, when he figured that he had waited long enough.

Shadows moved across the window now and then; several times Steve had heard the door open and close, had seen light spill from it, but he did not believe anybody had left the place. Whoever it was down there evidently felt secure. Steve leaned down and got a grip on Pard's collar, for he did not intend to let the dog betray him by any impatient move; then the two of them went cautiously forward. They were halfway to the cabin when they stopped.

For sudden turmoil had broken out down there. There were muffled, thumping sounds, voices raised excitedly, then a splintering noise that seemed to come from the back of the structure. More yells sounded, and Steve thought he glimpsed a dark shadow whipping past a corner of the cabin. From behind the building shots crashed out, somebody swore, and then Pard, with an eager yelp, jerked free of Steve's grip. Steve called sharply to the dog, but there was no stopping Pard now. He plunged through the underbrush, then there was silence. Disappointedly, Steve stood there. He was puzzled, too, for Pard had not charged toward the cabin, but rather away from it at an angle. Suddenly Steve understood.

"Dozey!" he exclaimed to himself softly. "He got away from 'em. That's who I saw run past the cabin and into the brush. Pard knew who it was and followed him!"

Evidently Dozey had made a clean getaway, for, outside the shots, there had been no attempt made to stop him. Probably the captors realized that it would be use-

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less trying to run him down in the darkness. There was no telling how he had made his escape, nor was it important now. Pard would find him quickly enough, and the pair of them would make their way back to Dozey's cabin on Sunrise Creek, or perhaps to the nearest point of the Goose Track. The problem had solved itself.

Yet there was another problem, even more important, it seemed to Steve Brandon, which still demanded an answer. Luck had enabled him to find this hide-out, but he didn't know who was there. And he knew that he wasn't going back tonight until he had discovered who was in that cabin.

He went forward again, picking his way carefully, and making no sound.

CHAPTER XVII

THE TRAP

STEVE could still hear voices on the far side of the cabin where Dozey Peters had made his escape. By the crash made, it sounded as though Peters had gone through a window. Yet aside from taking a few wild shots in the direction he had gone, none of those in the cabin had showed any inclination to follow; nor would they be expecting retribution until Dozey had time to get help. Steve went nearer, keeping out of the weak light from the window, and holding to cover as much as possible on the chance that somebody might open the door unexpectedly and see him. He was almost at the cabin when he heard the crackle of brush behind him and low voices. Somebody was coming.

At the moment he happened to be in the open. He had the impulse to run for the lee of the cabin, yet there was too much risk in that. Instead he flattened himself on the ground, but kept the rifle handy. If the newcomers found him, he'd be able to take care of himself. He saw their bulky shadows passing through a break in the woods so that they showed against the night sky. Two men. Steve could not make out if they carried guns. They went on confidently, straight toward the cabin, passing within twenty feet of where he lay. As they neared the cabin they called out something, and instantly the door flew open and a man stepped quickly out and into the darkness, so that he would not be silhouetted against the light. He had a rifle. Steve knew a moment of fear that the man would see him stretched on the ground, but evidently the other's eyes were temporarily accustomed to the light inside. The two newcomers strode on, and went inside, the man with the gun following and closing the door.

At once Steve heard loud, excited voices inside, and he got up and scurried for the side of the cabin just below the window. As he did so he heard one man say: "—got clear away. Worked his hands loose and went out the window after crackin' Ike on the jaw. We couldn't find hide or hair of him!"

"Chances are you never looked!" was the retort. Steve's pulse quickened. That was Joe Fengill. "Well, there'll be the devil to pay over this! You bungled the whole job from beginnin' to end! The he-coon hisself will be here tonight. You know what that's likely to mean!"

THERE was silence for a moment. "If it means," said the first man, "that he tries to throw a gun on me like he did on you—" The sentence went unfinished because Fengill snarled suddenly, there was a

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scuffling sound, a startling crash of glass close to Steve's face. Alarmed, Steve jumped back. On the ground lay a short-handled ax. Somebody —probably Fengill—had thrown it through the window.

"Clap a choker on that tongue of yours!" Fengill raged. "Or I'll drop you in your tracks, Curvo!"

A voice, probably Curvo's, whined: "Didn't mean nothin', Joe! You don't need to act like that. You nearly chopped my head off. I was just sayin' what the rest of us know. We don't mind doin' the chore, but we don't figure to let him shake loads out of a gun at us. He's too quick with his trigger finger—"

Steve could not hear the rest of it, because he had pulled back along the wall, away from the broken window. There was a risk that one of them might look out suddenly, and spot him. Yet there surely was another window to this cabin, on the opposite side. That would be broken out, too, because Dozey Peters had made his escape that way. Steve slid around there. He wanted a look at them inside; and there was a chance, too, that he might surprise them. Even if there were four or five men in there, he had a gun. He'd bank, too, that Dozey Peters would return with plenty of help, particularly when he learned that Steve had gone out hunting for him. Dozey was smart enough maybe to figure out why Pard was so far from home. He'd reason that Steve had used the dog to puzzle out the trail, and he'd come looking for him. Of course that was only chance, and Steve had no intention of counting on it; he'd go through with this thing alone. He raised up, squinting around a corner of the broken window, and at the same time lifted his gun muzzle.

He saw four men in there, only two of whom he recognized—Joe Fengill and Curvo. The others, he guessed, would be Dyke Morrow and Ike Tandy. Just Fengill's old gang, no more. But all along Steve had known that they were mere hirelings to do the dirty work, while some shrewder brain—that of the one Fengill had referred to as the "he-coon"—did the real planning. That the unknown ruled with an iron hand was evident by what had been said here tonight—the hint that there'd been trouble between him and Fengill, and the latter had been wounded that way. Fengill still kept his left hand down, and Steve remembered that Doc Willetts had said the man had a flesh wound under his left arm. But Fengill had a six-gun swung on his right hip. The others were unarmed, although a couple rifles stood in the corner.

Steve stuck his own gun suddenly over the window sill, and called out: "Up with 'em!"

All four men turned sharply, Fengill's right hand going for the belt gun, but as the rifle muzzle swung his way, he lifted his hands obediently with the others. For a moment they only stared, hatred and fear mixed in their expressions. Steve, holding the gun in one hand like a pistol, reached for the window sill with his left hand and slid a leg into the room. He moved slowly, warily, never relaxing attention for an instant. Nor had his gun stopped covering them when he climbed in at last and straightened up.

"Face that wall yonder!" he commanded. They obeyed willingly enough, still keeping their hands in the air. He walked over and jerked the gun out of Fengill's holster, slipping the weapon into his own pocket.

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It didn't look as though the others had any guns hidden about them. Next Steve got hold of the rifles in the corner and carried them out of the men's reach. Still his captives had said nothing. They knew that he had a long score against them, and they couldn't be certain just how he was going to pay it off. Probably they figured it was safest to say nothing at all.

BRANDON'S gaze explored the room with brief glances, for he dared not take his eyes off the men for more than a fraction of a second at a time. Then he saw what he wanted—a coil of rope which looked like part of the gear belonging to a high climber, hanging on a peg. There was a double-bitted ax and a felling saw hanging there, too, and he guessed that this cabin was used by somebody connected with Forsythe's tract, maybe a ranger or fire guard. But the climbing rope was the thing; all he had to do now was to pick the weakest of this gang. He guessed that might be the one with whom Fengill had clashed.

"Curvo," he ordered sharply, "get that climbing rope yonder! Rest of you stand there as though frozen to the wall!" Sullenly Curvo obeyed. "Rope their hands together!" commanded Steve. "Leave enough rope between 'em so they can walk Injun file!"

Fengill half turned, started to lower his hands. "You blasted knothead!" he raged. "You won't get away with it for a minute—"

The rifle exploded, and the bullet smacked the wall over Fengill's head. Involuntarily he jerked his hands upward again. "All I want," Steve said warningly, "is a halfway reason for blowing a hole through you. Hustle up that job, Curvo!"

Curvo, startled by the gunshot

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and profoundly impressed, obeyed quickly. Deftly he dropped a knot over the hands of each man, then ran a length of rope to the next.

"Tie the rest of it around your own waist," Steve told him. "You'll lead this little procession of polecats, but first I'll make sure those knots are solid." They seemed to be tied honestly, and Steve chuckled appreciatively as he discovered that Joe Fengill was the last in line.

"This works out fine," Steve declared. "Curvo leads off, and the rest of you follow, while I walk behind with this gun muzzle against Fengill's spine. First time anything goes wrong, I'll cut Fengill in two. Wouldn't be surprised if the bullet went through him and the next man, too. You won't hurt my feelings any if you give me a chance to try it!"

Soberly, Curvo started toward the door, pulling the others, but Fengill said suddenly: "Hold up a minute, Brandon! Maybe you and I ought to talk a spell!"

"If you can talk fast, I'll listen," Steve told him. "But you'd better make it interesting!" He picked up the other two rifles in the corner and slung them under his left arm. His own gun was gripped in his right hand, pistol fashion.

"What you goin' to do with us?" Fengill demanded uneasily.

"Figured on turning you over to Dozey Peters and his men," replied Steve. "If you counted on landing in Clem Fears' jail, where your friends might get you out, you're wrong. The boys up on the right of way likely want to settle this in their own way. You put the thought in their heads when you tried to drum up that lynching party for me! But if you'll name me the man back of this, I'll guarantee you a fair trial—for the robbery of Kenovan's pay roll!"

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"You're crazy!" declared Fengill. "I don't know what you're talkin' ab—"

"I do!" broke in Curvo nervously. "Hanged if I'm goin' through with this! If you won't talk, Fengill, I will. I don't aim to let that Peters crowd get hold of me again!"

"You'll keep your mouth shut!" roared Fengill. "I'm still runnin' things here, and I'll do what talkin' there is to be done. Brandon, I'll take my chances with Dozey Peters if you won't dicker my way. You'll turn us loose before we'll talk at all. We don't aim to go back to Stringtown for any fool trial. You give us a chance to get out of the country, and we'll come clean!"

"We're wasting time!" Steve said curtly. "Step out in front, Curvo!"

"Wait, now, wait!" begged Curvo. "I don't care what Fengill says; I'll do this my own way. I'll tell—"

"You're yaller as a buried bone, Curvo!" Fengill cut in brusquely. "But you don't need to worry. Brandon ain't takin' us anywhere, you understand? He's waited too long, just like I figgered he would!"

THERE was something confident about Fengill's manner which made Steve uneasy, yet he was sure the man must be bluffing.

"March!" Steve told Curvo. Hesitantly, Curvo obeyed, the others following. Fengill, still grinning, came last of the four, while Steve held the gun against the man's back, ready for treachery. "Straight through the woods!" Steve commanded. "You know the way." He stepped out of the doorway after them, and as he did so it seemed that the cabin collapsed and fell on him. He had the sensation of falling through space that blazed with light.

STEVE felt queerly, and his brain seemed to cling to a single notion. "I'm hard to kill!" he kept telling himself. "Hard to kill! It's been tried before, but they can't do it!" He could feel that he was being manhandled, that he was being lifted and carried, but there didn't seem to be anything he could do about it; his muscles refused to respond to his will. Yet he held to that same thought, that he wasn't dead and that he couldn't be killed. He was in darkness and yet he had the feeling that life was all about him, for he could hear the murmur of nearby voices, yet could not understand anything that was being said. Then, abruptly, the hands let go of him and he fell with a thump that sent stinging pain throughout his whole body.

But the shock of the fall had a peculiar effect. His senses cleared a little, and with that came blinding agony that throbbed in his brain. The voices were louder and clearer now, and then they were going away. He heard the sound of a door slamming. On the heels of that must have come unconsciousness at last, for when he roused he realized that he had been asleep for some time. He opened his eyes and concluded that it must still be night, for he could not see. Then he realized that he was blindfolded.

He tried to raise his hands to tear the blindfold from his eyes, but his wrists were bound, and so were his feet. There was no sense in yelling, because he knew that he was alone; the silence about him was something that pressed down like a thick blanket. He lay there listening, straightening things out in his mind, although that slow throb in his brain persisted. But, bit by bit, he pieced it together.

"Fengill wasn't bluffing, after all,"

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Steve reminded himself dourly. "He held me there as long as he could with that palaver, because he knew somebody was coming. When I stepped out of the door that son of a gun was waiting there, just like Fengill figured he'd be. He slugged me so quick I couldn't pull the trigger—just as Fengill figured!" Disgust with himself for having failed made him almost forget his hurts. Now he was trapped, tied up, waiting for them to decide what to do with him. It was strange that they hadn't killed him outright. Maybe the man whom Fengill called "the he-coon" didn't care to go that far.

VOICES again! They were faint at first, but rapidly grew louder, and Steve could hear the clump of men's feet on the ground. Then the door was banged open, and he heard Fengill's chuckle. A moment later Steve flinched as Fengill's boot thumped against his ribs.

"Figured you'd come alive," Fengill declared. "Well, that makes it all the better. You'll enjoy what's goin' to happen to you all that much more!"

"You goin' through with this?" The voice was Curvo's. "The boss will raise holy Ned when he finds out!"

"He'll never find out unless you tell him, you white-livered fool!" snarled Fengill. "For two cents, Curvo, I'd leave you here with this dude! As long as this bird is alive, there's none of us safe. Ought to have rubbed him out that first night. But, I'm takin' no more chances. I aim to keep myself clear until this whole deal's swung. You'll help cut up more money than you ever saw before, Curvo, but you've got to take orders. I've been patient with you long enough. You try to jim things up again like you wanted to do tonight because you got scared, and I'll whittle you down then and there. That's a promise, and the last one. Now, hustle up some of them shavin's and kindlin'. This cabin's dry as bone; all she needs is a start, and away she goes."

"What about Brandon?" Curvo asked. "Ain't you goin' to gag him? What if he yells and somebody hears him? Morrow and Tandy are likely to come back soon. I don't want too many to know about this job!"

Fengill chuckled again. "Let him yell!" he declared. "Nobody can head him when the blaze gets to goin'. If you like, I'll plug him first, only that'd sort of spoil things!"

"No!" protested Curvo. "Don't do that! This is bad enough!"

"Then hustle!" Fengill commanded.

Steve Brandon found speech at last. "Fengill," he said thickly, "I gun-whipped you and you took it like a mangy coyote! If you're counting on me yelling, I'm going to cross you up. Curvo knows that you can't be trusted, that you aim to do him in as soon—"

"Shut up!" raged Fengill, kicking him again. "You want to get me sore enough to shoot you first, but I won't do it. Get that blaze goin', Curvo! If you listen to him long enough you'll be yelpin' yourself!"

"They'll stretch your long neck for this, Curvo," went on Steve. "They'll stretch it until it snaps. But they won't let Fengill die as easy as that. They'll—"

"Joe!" cried Curvo suddenly. "I . . . I can't go through with this! It ain't human! Let's get out and leave him here! He can't stop us now!"

"They're coming!" cried Steve inspiredly. "I can hear 'em! Dozey

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and his men. They'll grab you before you can get—"

"Blast you, Curvo!" snarled Fengill. "Gimme them matches. I'll do this myself. And if you interfere, I'll leave you here with him. He's lyin'—tryin' to scare you!"

Steve heard the splutter of a match, then came the crackle of shavings catching fire; he caught a whiff of smoke.

"There!" cried Fengill. "Figure that out, Brandon! You can keep talkin' to yourself until it gets too hot, then you can yell. Get goin', Curvo—or do you want to keep him company? I'll leave you here to listen to his lies!"

"Wait!" screamed Curvo. "He ain't lyin'! I can hear 'em myself. They're comin'! They—"

"Shut up!" Fengill snapped. He listened intently. Silence clamped over the place, a silence broken only by the thin crackling of flames that grew in intensity. Then Steve heard that sound again—the thing which had made him cry out defiance—a murmur that ran through the ground, floated in air.

"Hear it?" screamed Curvo in panic. "They're comin', I tell you! *No, Joe!* Don't you do it! If you kill him and they grab us, we'll swing sure!" Steve heard them struggling!

"Let go!" yelled Fengill. "You dirty double-crosser! Let go me!"

"No!" Curvo begged. "You—I got your gun, Joe! We'll get out of here, both of us! Come on!" Cursing, Fengill ran out of the door, Curvo behind him. From somewhere outside a man's voice was raised. Not the voice of Dozey Peters. It was a voice Steve Brandon had not expected to hear.

Who is outside the cabin? Will Steve be rescued, or will Fengill's plan to burn him alive succeed? Where is the "he-coon"? Follow this smashing story of battling lumbermen in next week's Western Story.

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